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THE CHILD-NARRATOR AND HIS WORLD IN SELECTED WORKS OF AFRICAN AND DIASPORA WRITERS

BY

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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Stephen H. Arnold
Supervisor

E. D. Blodgett

Date December 14, 1979

A poet is one who knew how to
remain a child.

Jean Cocteau

To all children in Sierra Leone and in Canada, but especially to my nieces and nephews Modupeh, Olabisi, Abioseh, Olufemi, Joy, Toot, Julian, Ina, Serge, Yann, Laiki, Safi and Stepho.

With love,

A. M. P.

ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes to study the treatment of children as narrators in the fiction of selected writers who, though geographically thousands of miles apart, depict societies which have certain historical and cultural heritages in common.

After an introduction in which I will give a schematic survey of the origins and development of the concept of childhood in real life in general and in literature in particular, I will then examine the different ways in which the child-narrator has been employed in the following novels:

Richard Wright's Black Boy (1945)

George Lamming's In the Castle of my Skin (1953)

Mongo Beti's Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba (1956)

Ferdinand Oyono's Une vie de boy (1956)

V. S. Naipaul's Miguel Street (1959)

A question that will constantly be posed or implied during the investigation will be, "Why choose a child instead of an adult as narrator?" I will try to answer this question by suggesting the probable motivations for the authors' choice of their narrative vehicles, as well as by looking at the narrator's functions within each work. By showing why these novelists preferred children to adults as narrators, and by demonstrating what advantages or disadvantages such a choice has, I hope to point out the importance of the childhood theme--a subject that has often been neglected in the criticism of fiction by black authors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is customary to say "thank you" to certain people after the writing of a thesis. My words of gratitude to the following should, however, not be taken as those put on paper to follow convention. My thanks to them are deep and sincere. To the members of my examining committee, I say thank you, not only for the patience they manifested in reading my thesis at a particularly busy time of year, but also for their judicious critical comments. To my advisor, Professor S. H. Arnold, whose brotherly but rigorous concern for a good job made me gratefully become more aware of my shortcomings, I can only thank him in a language we both understand--"tenki tenki yah."

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Finally, to my darling Mulsie, I can only say that her loyal endurance and sustaining trust have exercised themselves in palpable ways . . .

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

For the contemporary reader, the concept of childhood, both in literature and in real life, is taken for granted. In the domain of literature, a never-waning interest in children can be seen in the phenomenal number of books that have been written over the last century, about and for children. Parallel to this literary interest is a social one as is manifested by the recent United Nations' declaration of 1979 as "the year of the child."

Children have always appeared, at least in western literature, from its earliest times; Abraham's son Isaac in the Old Testament, and Hector's Astyanax in Homer's Iliad may be regarded as two of the earliest examples of children recorded in literature. In the interpretation of the scene where Abraham is about to slaughter Isaac as a testimony of his faith in God, the emphasis has nearly always been put on the father's unshaken conviction about God's powers, but the usually unnoticed role of the child in this drama should not be underestimated, for it is only because of Isaac's presence that the moral of the story is registered (Genesis 21: 8-21). Homer has received praise for the exceptional and "ungreek" manner in which he presents a child's emotions and response in the famous scene where Astyanax recoils from his father Hector, just before he goes to battle against the Achaians, contrary to his wife Andromache's advice (The Iliad, Bk. VI II 400-95).[1]

It should be noted, however, that though a few writers like Homer

and Sophocles (for instance in his Philoctetes) occasionally gave children important roles in their works, Greek and classical writers, by and large, ignored the world of the child. This can also be said of "Elizabethan, Jacobean and Restoration dramatists and poets [who], like their predecessors, did not consider the child a suitable medium through which to comment on the condition of man."[2] Some notable exceptions to this view are, of course, the unknown Spanish author's picaresque La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes (1954), Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet (1591) and Voltaire's Candide (1758), works in which adolescents who were considered as children in their respective societies, contribute immensely to the unfolding of themes.

It was not until the nineteenth century that authors started treating the personality, the fate and the world of children as dominant themes. Authors from the romantic period, in particular, developed a new attitude towards the child whom they saw as a perfect medium to give expression to their overall and personal dissatisfactions with society; hence a new thematic tradition with the child as its base was established.[3] In English literature, Dickens will always be remembered, among other things, for his powerful description of childhood which has sensitized generations of readers to the special problems of children--a theme which also helped him to comment on the deplorable social conditions of the time in celebrated works like Oliver Twist (1837-39), David Copperfield (1849-50), Hard Times (1854) and Great Expectations (1860). This interest in childhood was also expressed by writers in other countries as well as by those writing in different genres, as can be seen in Victor Hugo's poems "Lorsque l'enfant paraît (1831), "Jeanne etait au pain sec" (1877), Alphonse Daudet's Le petit chose (1868) and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn

(1885).

This observation about the great interest in childhood in the nineteenth century leads to some important questions: Did nineteenth century authors suddenly discover a phenomenon known as childhood? If they did not, what generated such interest in this area? Once the thematic tradition was established, how was it developed? To answer these questions it is necessary, even if in a cursory manner, to look at the genesis, history and evolution of childhood as a concept.

According to a historian of childhood, Philippe Ariès, childhood was never seriously considered as an aspect of life in its own right until the seventeenth century. Ariès further suggests that though children had definitely been portrayed in artistic forms such as painting since antiquity, they had merely been represented as miniature adults. This attitude continued until the seventeenth century when artists started considering children as being categorically separate from adults. Ariès asserts that a major reason for this change of attitude among artists was their growing awareness of the fleeting nature of what is now known as childhood.[4] Although Ariès does not clearly state it, one may conjecture that this fleeting nature of childhood was largely due to the structure of society, which up to the seventeenth century was essentially feudal.

Under the feudal system, primogeniture and caste meant early adulthood for all children; the children of the nobles accepted adult responsibility through early marriage and inheritance of family wealth, and the children of the serfs were thrown into the adult world mainly through the early work life which they were forced into for survival. As a result of this early, and often unprepared-for work life, children of the poor

(who were always in the majority) hardly survived the crucial formative years of childhood.

By the seventeenth century, capitalism had begun to replace feudalism, and one of its by-products, the concept of a nuclear family (fostered primarily by the ruling class), was another reason why society then started making a distinction between children and adults. The propagation of the Christian religion also contributed towards this attitude; the church, with its insistance on the innocence of the child, tried to protect children from the sinful, contaminated, adult world.[5] Another reason which can be surmised, especially after reading Dickens' Hard Times, lies in the attitude of the bourgeoisie towards children, especially with respect to education. The bourgeois class realized that if they required deferred adulthood i.e. if they made everyone concentrate upon children as children (unlike under feudalism where the transition between childhood and adulthood was very rapid), and allowed these children to get a more solid theory intensive education before becoming adults, then the capitalists would have more chance of success in the commercial, industrial and financial worlds. In Hard Times, Dickens makes this utilitarian concept of childhood the object of a most devastating satire and we get this in the brilliant contrast he makes between "girl number twenty, Sissy Jupe", the girl who "wrongly" defines a horse as we know it, and Bitzer, the real product of the ruling class, whose pedantic and ridiculous definition of a horse is accepted as correct. This satire is also demonstrated in the life-denying images that are associated with the "hard facts" school of Gradgrind and company.

As interest in children developed in the real world, so did it in the world of letters. Peter Coveney rightly refers to the seminal

influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in his educational treatise Emile (1762) came out with "the revolutionary idea [for its time] that the child is important in himself and not as a diminutive adult." Coveney also maintains that Rousseau saw childhood "as the period of life when man most closely approximated to the state of nature",[6] and because of this latter idea one can see why childhood was to become one of the recurrent themes in Romantic literature. The Romantics regarded the industrialization in bourgeois society and its concomittants as symbolic of the fall of man, and hence they looked upon childhood as a model of emulation for regaining that period of lost innocence.

Children have continued the long march along the literary road ever since the romantic period, and they have appeared in various forms and in all literatures. By the turn of the nineteenth century, Freudian and other forms of psychology, which often lay stress on the importance of childhood comportment and experiences as determinants of later adult-behaviour, gave rise to a fresh treatment of the childhood theme. Whereas romantic writers like Dickens had centred their interest on the physical plight of children, authors like Henry James in What Maisie Knew (1897), and Gide in Si le grain ne meurt (1926), started concentrating on the psychological dilemma of children of the conservative bourgeois class, by the early part of this century.

The twentieth century has seen a proliferation of writings by black authors, and childhood has been a major theme for some of them; but it should be observed that in spite of the ever-growing awareness of childhood in works by these black authors, no comprehensive study has up till now been done on even a single aspect of childhood treated by these writers.

My primary concern in this thesis will, therefore, be an examination of childhood as it is presented in novels of five writers covering a geographic spread from Africa, through the West Indies, to the United States. Any investigation of childhood in literature at this point in time certainly demands some selection and limitation, if the thesis is not to become either a mere compilation of authors and works in which childhood has been treated, or a detailed but inordinately long study. I have, therefore, decided to analyze rather closely selected novels by Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono (Cameroon), George Lamming (Barbados), V. S. Naipaul (Trinidad), and Richard Wright (U. S. A.).

Geographical and linguistic considerations are, of course, criteria I have used in my selection, but the major standard I have employed in selecting these representative texts has been the multiple use to which their authors have put childhood in the works. In each of the novels I will examine, it will be seen that childhood becomes both a theme and a technique. Because each tale is narrated by a first-person narrator in these works, aspects of the narrator's life become a theme, and structurally each author uses his narrator as a means of commenting upon society.

It is mainly because of this particular use of childhood that some other authors, whose works would have been relevant in inquiring into the theme of childhood, have been left out. Among these are the Guyanese René Maran, whose autobiographical Le Coeur serré (1931), which recalls the author's loneliness in a French boarding school and Robert Wellesley-Cole's Kossoh Town Boy (1960), a work in which the author reflects on his childhood and adolescence in his native Freetown, Sierra Leone. Camara Laye's L'Enfant noir (1953) which gives a vivid though at times

idealized description of childhood in traditional African society is yet another book that could have been treated. Now, although these authors deserve praise for their thematic treatment of childhood, I do not think their stylistic uses of childhood warrant their inclusion in this thesis.

A major point of focus in the whole study will, therefore, be on narrative technique as a key to the question of verisimilitude. It is for this reason that I have divided the chapters according to the different ways in which the authors have used their narrators, instead of merely linking them by either their geographical backgrounds or linguistic affinity. Chapter II, "The Child-Narrator as Diarist" will look into the possible reasons for Beti's and Oyono's use of their boy-narrators, as well as into the effectiveness of such usage. In Chapter III, which shows Richard Wright and George Lamming using their respective narrators as autobiographers, I will not only try to see why these authors decide to use the autobiographical form which can be intensely personal, but also to see whether any special use of this form has been made, since the autobiographers are children. Chapter IV has been labelled as "The Child-Narrator as Cynic" obviously because of the narrator's cynicism; my method in this chapter (as in the others) will be to work inductively from the text, and try to suggest reasons why Naipaul creates such a cynical <u>raconteur</u>, as well as to show the kind of society depicted in the work.

In my Conclusion, I will briefly reiterate the different ways these authors have used their children as narrators. If my comments, together with the in-depth examination I would have made of the novels, in each of the chapters, will help elucidate the effectiveness, or otherwise,

of the use of children as narrators in fiction by black authors, the aim of this thesis would have been accomplished.

NOTES

[1] Robert Pattison, The Child-Figure in English Literature (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), p. 1.

[2] Muriel Shine, The Fictional Children of Henry James (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 3.

[3] Peter Coveney gives a detailed account of the attitude of English romantic writers towards children in his Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature (London: Rockliff, 1957).

[4] Philippe Ariès, L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime (Paris: Plon, 1960), pp. 33-34.

[5] Peter Brooks, "Towards Supreme Fictions," Yale French Studies 43 (1969), pp. 6-7.

[6] Coveney, p. 6.

CHAPTER II

The Child-Narrator as Diarist

In 1962, Gerald Moore, a pioneering critic of African literature indicated Cameroon's special role in the evolution of African literary history. According to Moore, "nowhere on the continent of Africa has there been a more sudden explosion of creative activity than in the former French Cameroons, now the Cameroon republic."[1] Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono are undoubtedly two of the dominant figures that contributed to this literary explosion. Beti (whose original name was Alexander Biyidi), was born in 1932, in Mbalmayo, Cameroon. He started his writing career in 1954 when, as a young student in France, he published his first novel Ville cruelle[2] under the pseudonym of Eza Boto. In the ensuing four years, Beti increased his creative output by writing three more novels including Mission terminée[3] which won the prix Sainte-Beuve in 1957. (These three novels were published under the pseudonym by which he is now universally known.) It is a curious fact, however, that whereas Mission terminée was received with great enthusiasm, Beti's third novel Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba[4] (which was published a year earlier than Mission terminée), provoked horrified reactions even years after its publication. Initially, it was banned in both France and Cameroon, and unlike other books of equal merit by francophone African authors it was only translated into English in 1971, fifteen years after its first appearance. Even a cursory glance at these two novels clearly reveals the reason why the hostile response to Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba changed

to applause in Mission terminée.

In Mission terminée the main target of Beti's satiric thrust is half-educated Africans who assume that because of a partial exposure to European ways they have a right to feel superior to their illiterate countrymen. Jean-Marie Mezda, the hero of Mission terminée is a young, pompous and condescending senior high school student who goes back to his native village, Vimili, after two unsuccessful attempts to pass his baccalauréat. In spite of his failure at school, he is treated with deference and respect by his relatives and friends in the village, who regard his education (albeit incomplete) as a credential of privilege. He is, therefore, given the prestigious task of retrieving a woman who has run off from his village to another village known as Kala with a man from another ethnic group. When Mezda gets to Kala, he stays with an uncle who introduces him to people as a most distinguished scholar and this makes the Kala people also regard this emissary with veneration. They look up to him for guidance, give him numerous gifts and even get him a wife; but by the end of the novel the reader realizes that the hero is essentially an empty-headed, semi-literate student who has to be taught a lot of things by the very villagers he considers 'uncivilized' and 'irresponsible'. One is, therefore, not surprised that, given the innocuous nature of the subject matter and the polished style in which it is rendered, Mission terminée should have received so much praise.

With Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba, however, it is obvious that, in spite of the author's accomplished use of narrative technique, its thematic content was enough reason for it to be outlawed by the powers-that-be; in fact, thematically and to a large extent stylistically, this novel has distinct affinities not with Mission terminée, but with Une

vie de boy[5], also written in 1956, by Ferdinand Oyono, a fellow Cameroonian and contemporary of Beti.[6]

Both authors use their native Cameroon as the setting for their respective novels, and even though the narration in these works is done mainly by boy-narrators, the theme of childhood is hardly treated. As we shall see, the children provide strategically positive narrative angles on action that is not directly the concern of children, hence this discrepancy between vehicle and content.

It was, perhaps, inevitable that, given Cameroon's peculiar colonial history, these two novelists should have shown so much concern in exposing the collusion between the colonial administration and the church and also that they should have been so unequivocal in their denunciation of these two institutions. Cameroon's colonial history is different from that of other former colonies because of the large number of colonial rulers it had before "independence" was granted to one of the constituent sections in 1957. It was first of all the Germans who, between 1885 and 1916--at the height of European expansionism--tried to make a model colony out of this country. Then, after the "Cameroon war" of 1914-1916, the allied forces of Britain and France occupied the whole of Cameroon, which they divided into two parts. In 1922 these two imperial nations received mandates from the League of Nations to run the country; east Cameroon by the French and the smaller west Cameroon bordering with Nigeria, by the British. By 1945, the country's status was changed again and this time it became a trustee of the United Nations, but with the proviso that the governmental affairs were still to be supervised by both the governments of Westminster and L'Elysée respectively.
In this system of government, as with most colonial institutions, power

was largely vested in the omnipotent colonial governor and his supporting staff of administrators like regional commandants and district commissioners, officials who at times ruled with the utmost severity and brutality. The colonized people were divided into two categories--"the French citizens" and "the natives" (or "l'indigenāt"); the "natives" who, by virtue of their poverty, illiteracy and "business" could not qualify for "citizenship" were invariably subjected to subhuman treatment.[7]

It is especially important for such historico-sociological details to be borne in mind when reading Beti's Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba and Oyono's Une vie de boy, for in these two novels we see that the respective authors are putting the colonial regime and its allied institution, the church under close scrutiny. It is also significant, however, that because critics have above all and appropriately concerned themselves with the obvious themes of anti-clericalism and colonial oppression and to a lesser extent with elucidating the authors' narrative skills (especially the use of irony), the role of child-narrators has not been given its due prominence in these works.[8]

Beti and Oyono, who show tremendous consciousness of their craft, realize that in treating topical issues such as the relationships between the colonizer and the colonized (which invariably means the relationships between one race and another), and the role of the church or of religion in a given society, they stand the risk of being charged by hostile critics with either distorting or eschewing reality. They also understand that if they were to present these inflammatory subject matters through the eyes of an omniscient narrator, they would make themselves vulnerable to accusations of "authorial interference" which would hence make the two novels read like tracts rather than novels. My objective will, there-

fore, be to show how these two Cameroonian authors avoid being liable to these charges and, at the same time, write novels of distinction.

One technical device both Beti and Oyono manipulate deftly is a satirical first-person narrator. The main advantage of this choice of narrative strategy is the obliteration of the presence of the author; it also has the advantage of allowing the author to look critically and, perhaps, objectively at both the society being described and the narrator. This being the case, a question which poses itself is "Why use a child instead of an adult-narrator in works that are nearly devoid of the childhood theme?" My answer to this is found partly in a comment Toundi, the narrator in Une vie de boy makes, when M. Salvain, the paternalistic school master "avec autorité . . . tint à expliquer à tout le monde (meaning the racist bigots gathering there) le comportement des nègres . . . " In the narrator's words:

> chacun, pour le contredire, raconta sa petite histoire personelle avec un indigène pour conclure que le nègre n'est qu'un enfant ou un couillon
>
> (Boy p. 81 Emphasis mine)

It is significant that according to these colonialists, the exclusive and equivalent alternative to being a child is being a fool, an opinion which has the underlying implication of regarding not only the African but all children in general as beings lacking in intelligence. But Beti and Oyono know better. They use their boy-narrators so that we can get a full exposé of the lives and conduct of characters in the society which considers them insipid and hence harmless. The novelists also give more credence to their narrators by making them use the diary form--an art form which has the distinct advantages not only of maintaining continuity in varied episodes, which might otherwise seem unrelated, but

also of presenting intimate details of the diarist and his world in a more convincing manner.

Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba is the chronicle of the desperate but unsuccessful attempts made by le père Drumond, who has been a French missionary in Africa for twenty years, to convert the "pagan natives" to Christianity. Events in the novel are mainly centred around the lives of the priest and his young, naive acolyte, Denis, who presents everything to the reader through the medium of his diary. At the start of the story they leave Bomba, the regional headquarters of the catholic mission on a picaresque adventure to win back "the lost sheep", the Tala people who have rebelled against Christianity. As in Voltaire's Candide, in Lazarillo de Tormes or in other novels in the picaresque tradition, the main protagonists in Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba acquire considerable experience in the course of their travels. Father Drumond first of all becomes aware of the people's scepticism towards religion; he then discovers the connivance between the spiritual and the secular colonialists; but his most painful experience occurs when, on their return to Bomba, he finds out to his horror that "the sixa"--an institution he had created ostensibly for the moral upbringing of christian brides-to-be--had been used as a brothel and as a centre for the propagation of venereal diseases by his christian brethren. The reverend father finally abandons these "godless" people and goes back to Europe.

It is, therefore, understandable that the majority of critics who examine the themes of Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba do so from a socio-political angle, but it can also be seen that in discussing Beti's narrative technique in this novel, a good number of critics attribute the novelist's success merely to his ingenious exploitation of the

"innocence" of his narrator.[9] Now, while it is true that Denis displays an astonishing amount of naiveté in certain scenes (for instance in the episode where he assumes that the noise coming from Zacharie's neighbouring room is due to Zacharie's diarrhea when in actual fact Zacharie is enjoying an epic, romping sexual episode with a sixa woman), it is my view that the narrator's "innocence" should not be used solely as a means for generating an ironical perspective on actions in the novel, and that, perhaps, a deeper consideration of at least some of Denis' experiences would throw more light on events as they happen in the book as well as on the author's style. That is to say, Denis is important as a person or character, not just as a vehicle or perspective, and his innocence is due to specific items of his experience and not just a result of his being a child. In order to see how the practical knowledge gained by Denis during the tour of Tala country determines the thematic direction taken and the stylistic structure that emerges in Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba, it will be necessary to look at the theme of love--a theme which some critics do not notice in Beti's writings until Perpétue (1974), but which I regard as an old theme that has been neglected in criticism of Beti's novels of the pre-independence era.[10]

In Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba there are several love relationships. The reader can distinguish institutionalized ones like that between Zacharie and his wife, Clementine, illicit rapports such as those between the "sixa" women and some men associated with the church, and the youthful liaison between Denis and Catherine. However, the best demonstration of the theme of love and its role in the world of the child-narrator is seen in the effective relationships between Denis and two people, le père Drumond and Catherine.

In order to illustrate this conviction I shall devide the novel into two sections corresponding to these two relationships. The first part starts from the time Denis is handed over to the mission authorities and ends with the beginning of his sexual experiences. The rest of the novel obviously constitutes the second part. In the earlier section, le père Drumond's paternalism leads Denis to develop a very strong filial love for him. The boy remarks that whereas the other priest in the mission, le père Le Guen, appears to him as a friend, le père Drumond becomes more like a father. It is this attachment to the "holy" man, which becomes even more prominent when one realizes that Denis has virtually been abandoned by his only living parent, his father, that makes the young boy become such a faithful lackey. It is a sign of Beti's craftmanship that he demonstrates his disapproval of this kind of purely subjective "love" while developing the more popular themes in the work. The novelist seems to be hinting here that love must have an objective basis and should not rest on pure subjectivity, a theme which he gives greater dimension in Perpétue.

I refer to Denis' "love" for Drumond as subjective because of the narrow, adulatory way he shows his love for "le pauvre Christ" Drumond. The young boy gives unequivocal support to the man of God, no matter what he does; Denis endorses the "punishment" meted out by Drumond to the Tala people; he disapproves of the priest's nickname 'Le malin' and he has nothing but disdain for the young man whose fiancée has been impounded by the church and who thus questions the priest about the legitimacy of such an action. Through such incidents the novelist shows that uncritical love directed at a single individual leads to blindness and stupidity. This love for Drumond simply allows Denis to live in a self-deluding

world and as a consequence he often ratifies some of the most wrong-headed actions taken by his mentor, and for which we know the author is obviously condemning him. For instance, the child enthusiastically gives support to the priest's unsympathetic rejection of the old, toothless and penniless christian woman who could not afford to pay her church dues; I do not think, as Kwabena Britwum suggests, that Denis maintains an "unwitting ironic distance" here or that it is only Father Drumond who receives Beti's gibes.[11] Given the wavering manner in which Denis finally gives support to his boss in this episode, one suspects that if it were some other clergyman who had rejected the poor old woman, the boy's reaction would have been different.

The reader also notices that Drumond's religious frenzy is not only grotesque but can also be dangerous, hence we see the high premium he attaches to the "spiritual" side of life when he is called to offer aid to Joseph Garba, the villager who has been impaled by a tree; even though he is summoned to give physical help to this dying man, the spiritual father goes through a ridiculous (one might even say useless), ritual of asking the man for confession. Joseph Garba dies and, for this, the priest gets the warmest commendation from Denis:

> J'étais heureux en songeant que cet évenement
> les remettrait peut-être dans le droit chemin.
> Et peut-être, si les gens s'amendaient, le R.P.S.
> ne renoncerait pas à ce beau pays.
>
> (PCB p. 42)

The boy expresses similar satisfaction and hope when he learns that the colonial administration will forcibly throw people out of their homes and conscript them for forced labour; the people will not only learn their lesson about God, but will quickly go back to the man our narrator loves so well, le père Drumond. No surprise, therefore, that Denis almost

leaps for joy when the church leader launches an unjustified attack on the village dancers, and more so when he humiliates the charlatan witch doctor, Sanga Boto.

In each of these scenes Beti is turning his ironic focus from one aspect of colonial life to another and, at the same time, directing it at the narrator, but there is no evidence here to suggest that the author succeeds in this dual and effective use of narrative technique by simply capitalizing on the narrator's innocence. Rather, the novelist is making the point that as long as Denis maintains this narrow relationship with Drumond, or any other person for that matter, his vision of the external realities of the world will remain befogged. Such a standpoint not only allows Beti to comment on the relationships between people but gives him enough room to manoeuvre with stylistic devices like irony. Because Denis is shown to be such a zealot of the cleric, the novelist is able to direct double-edged irony at both of them and the same time give the reader reason other than merely the boy's innocence for some of his actions in the novel.

The love relationship between Denis and Catherine in the second part confirms the opinion that Mongo Beti views real objective love as a major goal in liberated human relationships and the opposite, subjective love, as a by-product of oppressive social relations. This is the main reason why the sexual encounter between Denis and Catherine becomes the pivotal point for the transition of Denis' love for le père Drumond from a subjective to an objective plane. Furthermore, focus on this relationship facilitates the interpretation of Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba as a work dealing with "education" or "initiation"[12] for, as the parochial love relationship of the first part contributes to a very effective use

of irony, so does the broader, more humane kind of love (demonstrated by Denis and Catherine in the second part), lead the boy to a greater awareness of the harsh realities of life.

One can almost give a stage by stage documentation of Denis' coming into awareness from the moment he has his first sexual experience with Catherine. In this second section, Beti is not suggesting that sex is synonymous with love, but he certainly seems to be suggesting that raw sex, a very objective act, is closer to love than the obsequious devotion, full of self-effacement, that Denis had hitherto displayed. We notice that from a youthful initiating encounter, real love develops between Denis and Catherine and in this situation the stupidity and blindness which had characterized Denis' points of view on previous occasions are now replaced by clarity and open-mindedness. It is true that the boy is still loyal to Father Drumond even after his sexual initiation, but Beti makes him also realize now that love for "le pauvre christ" (Drumond, or even Jesus Christ), devoid of feelings for people is a pure chimera promoted by oppressors. Objectivity brings compassion and thus, whereas earlier instances such as the reverend's attack of the people received Denis' complete assent, he now begins to see validity in Zacharie's scepticism towards his patron's fanatical and violent proselytizing mission. He wonders whether Zacharie might, after all, not be right in maintaining this critical attitude. We get glimpses of mental growth here, and the child-narrator is on his way to self-illumination, but he is still not free from the ironic barbs of the author since he still hopes the reverend father superior will stay and "save" his people; the collusion between the church and the colonial oppressive state machinery is still not very clear to him.

As the story progresses, however, the boy's waning interest in his religious obligations become more obvious; he shows little enthusiasm for and even dodges serving mass at Zibi and Akamba respectively. While still at Akamba, Denis agrees with the village catechist who, in a discussion with the R.P.S. Drumond, equates Sanga Boto with God, as can be seen in this brief discussion:

> Le R.P.S. a demandé au catéchiste:
> - Dis-moi, si le sorcier les trouvait en train de transgresser un de ses commandements, est-ce qu'ils prendraient peur aussi?
> - Et comment, père? Bien sûr qu'ils prendraient peur. . .
> - Et pourquoi? Le sorcier ne représente pas Dieu!
> - Non, père, mais il représente le Diable!
> - Le Diable aussi fait peur.
>
> Denis: Je trouvais quant à moi que le catéchiste avait entièrement raison
>
> (PCB p. 150 Emphasis mine)

These views, which put God and the devil on the same footing, would have been scorned by Denis prior to his introduction to the mysteries of the flesh. The process of dereification continues, and he sums up his previous status neatly when he realizes what had been going on in the "Sixa":

> J'ai toujours entendu dire que le femmes de la sixa avaient une mauvaise conduite et je n'en croyais rien . . . Dieu suis-je bête! C'est toujours la même histoire: Il se passe des tas de choses et moi je ne vois jamais rien.
>
> (PCP pp. 160-1 Emphasis mine)

This illumination on the part of Denis is greatly enhanced by his rapport with Catherine. He has now received a taste of and acquired a feel for sex and love, and there is the strong suggestion that this makes him come to terms with the world. The scales which had previously been placed over his eyes by the "love" he had for Drumond are removed, and little wonder that Denis feels as if he has come out of a dream

when they return to Bomba after their tour. Significantly he speaks of that part of his life before the tour (obviously before the commencement of a real love relationship), as the life of " . . . qui perd connaissance, s'évapore en nuée de rêve, comme au sortir d'un sommeil . . . "--no doubt a very subjective state.

The development of the narrator's perception is shown in its final stage on his coming back to Bomba. He admits that he had been unduly severe in judging the Tala people and he finally expresses unreserved doubts about the efficacy of the christian religion. Although the boy's option of going tc work for a Greek merchant is far from the best one, we are left with positive hope that this view of the world in general and that of love in particular will be more open-minded.

This detailed examination of the child-narrator and the theme of love should suggest the possibilities for more thematic investigations of Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba, but I consider them even more relevant in discussing Beti's style. By making Denis love the two people in the way he does, the novelist makes his narrator have a natural reason for giving us intimate details of his life in the diary form, as well as making him into a vehicle for and a target of his ironic thrusts. It is partly in this sense that Beti's novel shares similarities with a closely-related tale, Oyono's Une vie de boy.

The narrator-hero in Une vie de boy is a young boy, Toundi, who is forced to flee from home primarily because of his sadistic, authoritarian father and also because of his own gluttony. On the day before his circumcision, Toundi runs away to the Head of the catholic mission in the imaginary town of Dangan, le père Gilbert, who has often attracted the young boy and other children with sweets, with a bid to convert them

to Christianity. During his short-lived stay with the priests, Toundi, like Denis in Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba, manifests profound love and admiration for Father Gilbert, to whom, he claims, he owes everything in life. Father Gilbert soon dies and Toundi then has to work as houseboy for the regional commandant, M. Decazy. Initially, the commandant and his newly-arrived wife treat Toundi with some compassion, though it is always tinged with condescension. As the novel advances, however, the boy becomes a witness more and more to the corruption, hypocrisy, brutality and deceit that characterize colonialism, and because of his "knowledge", the colonial oppressors finally get rid of Toundi in the most inhuman and savage manner. They trump up robbery charges against him, throw him into jail where he is cudgelled, tortured, and forced to work until he collapses; he is taken to hospital under the veneer of giving him medical aid, but the boy escapes from the hospital and even from Cameroon, but he is unable to survive the brutal beatings he had suffered in jail and he finally dies in Spanish Guinea.

Russell Linnemann cogently sums up what has been the dominant mode of criticism of Une vie de boy when he suggests that:

> The overwhelming bulk of Oyono's bitterness about colonialism is directed towards members of the governmental administration. It is they, who, with gestapo tactics and a totally unjustified superiority complex, brutalize a helpless people. Devoid of compassion, understanding and even a modicum of human decency, the workings of the French colonial system unfold as a never ending, methodical nightmare of horrors for those Africans who are subjected to it.[13]

But while the critics have been almost unanimous in their identification of Toundi's naive and artless reporting as the most effective method Oyono uses to give a rather detached disapprobation of colonialism, they have hardly ventured to ask why the boy-narrator, who is shown to be

quite intelligent in many ways, can be so extraordinarily naive on some other occasions. I would, therefore, like to suggest that in his virulent and justifiable attack on colonialism, Oyono is using his narrator's "innocence" in a special way. He is not suggesting in a Wordsworthian sense that the child, because of his proximity to nature, is the innocent being. This novelist is perfectly aware that childhood is not necessarily a period of state of innocence and naivete, and we are shown this in the systematic and detailed way Toundi records events in his life as well as in his manner of deriving sensual pleasure from girls even during church services. In order to see how Oyono manipulates Toundi's partial naiveté, it is necessary to look at the relationship between the narrator and Father Gilbert, in some detail.

When Toundi gets accepted by Gilbert, the boy gets from the priest a kind of parental warmth which he had never gotten from his real father. This makes the child develop deep love and admiration for his guardian and this is shown in his rhetoric when he describes their relationship:

> Je dois ce que je suis devenu au père Gilbert. Je l'aime beaucoup, mon bienfaiteur. C'est un homme gai, qui lorsque j'étais petit, me considerait comme un petit animal familier . . . Le père Gilbert m'a connu nu comme un ver, il m'a appris à lire et à écrire . . . Rien ne vaut cette richesse, bien que je sache maintenant ce que c'est que d'être mal habillé. . .
>
> (Boy p. 24)

Toundi has every right to be grateful to his benefactor who, as he points out, does many good things for him in spite of occasional brutality, but in reading between the lines of this speech and also in looking at Toundi's reaction to Father Gilbert's death and burial, one gets the feeling that this is not mere gratitude; it is, like with Denis and Drummond in Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba, a case of fanatical love. Oyono seems to be making the point that because of le père Gilbert's father-

like attitude towards Toundi, the boy puts tremendous trust in him and other white colonialists. And because of this unconditional belief, Toundi would often act in the most artless manner (especially in front of the colonialists), even though we know he is not stupid. This is best demonstrated when Toundi--who thinks that, as a houseboy to the commandant, he is "le roi des chiens"--has his first discussion with the commandant:

> Après m'avoir longuement observé mon nouveau maître me demanda à brûle-pour-point si j'étais un voleur.
> - Non, commandant, répondis-je.
> - Pourquoi n'es-tu pas un voleur?
> - Parce que je ne veux pas aller en enfer.
> - Comment est-ce, l'enfer?
> - Ben, c'est des flammes, les serpents et Satan avec des cornes . . . J'ai une image de l'enfer dans mon livre de prières . . . Je . . . Je peux vous la montrer.
>
> (Boy p. 33 Emphasis mine)

Toundi's description of hell here shows the childish nature of his mind, but the flow of the prose and his decision to go and show the picture of Satan in his prayer book to M. Decazy, the commandant, suggest that the boy looks upon his "maître" with the same intimacy he did Father Gilbert. One can infer that Toundi is going to trust M. Decazy as he trusted le père Gilbert and it is in this uncritical trust that the child-narrator's naiveté rests.

Having thus established Toundi as a resourceful but naive reporter, Oyono goes on to the real business of exposing and denouncing the world of the narrator. Relying to a large degree on the manipulation of Toundi's naiveté, the novelist skillfully uses irony to unmask the hypocrisy, viciousness and other evils of the colonial world. This is not to suggest that the colonialists are the only subjects of Oyono's attacks; the narrator's death, which makes Une vie de boy end on a pessimistic

note, should be seen as the author's overall critical attitude to Toundi and all those other colonials who regard their colonial lords as people to be trusted. Two of the narrator's relatives--his dictatorial father and gluttonous uncle--also come under the novelist's censure, but the best example of how Oyono uses Toundi's simplicity to pour scorn even on his fellow nationals is seen when the grovelling Chief Akoma comes to pay a courtesy call on the new commandant. Chief Akoma is shown to be ridiculous, nearly burlesque in his ostentatious pose; because he had been to France he struts around with ring-filled fingers, pretending to be what he is not. There is unmistakable irony and sarcasm in the description of the chief's meeting with M. le commandant:

> Quand il (Akoma) pénétra au salon, mon maître se leva et vint à lui, le bras tendu. Akoma le saisit de ses deux mains en le balançant de droit à gauche . . . A toutes les questions du commandant il repondait "Oui, Oui" en gloussant comme une poule. Akoma fait mine de comprendre le français, mail il n'y comprend absolument rien. Il paraît qu'on l'a présenté à Paris comme un grand ami de la France.
>
> (Boy p. 56)

Toundi's role as the innocent beholder is quite effective here, for behind this seeming unsophisticated narration we can see Oyono the author beckoning for the reader's attention to this chief's inanity as well as to the likelihood that he will betray his people (as can be seen in the sentence "Il paraît qu'on l'a présenté comme un grand ami de la France"). This kind of simple, uninvolved description by the raconteur is further used by the author to lay open the depravities of the colonialists. The portrayal of the church service will serve as an example;

> J'aime surtout la distribution de la communion le dimanche. Tous les fidèles se présentent à la Sainte Talbe, yeux fermés, bouche ouverte, langue tendue, comme s'ils faisaient une grimace. Les Blancs ont leur Sainte Table à part. Ils n'ont pas de belles dents. J'aime caresser les jeunes filles

> blanches sous le menton avec la patène que je leur présente lorsque le prêtre leur introduit l'hostie dans la bouche. C'est le boy d'un prêtre de Yaoundé qui m'a appris le truc. C'est par ce moyen que nous pouvons les caresser . . .
>
> (Boy p. 23)

The blatant racial discrimination of the church (which often preaches equality of all people), would apparently appear as a secondary issue to Oyono's humour in this passage, but it is not. While showing the pranks of a juvenile, the novelist is using this episode as a pointer forward to other scenes where the discriminatory attitude of the church will be shown in full. Later on in the novel, the "église Saint-Pierre de Dangan" is described as a hub of racism; whites have superior and comfortable seats whilst their black brethren in Christ (after scrambling through the only door specially reserved for them), have to squat on wooden trunks. The blacks are also constantly under the supervision of brutal catechists who are always prepared to whack any one of them guilty of inattentiveness. However, in the description of these scenes, Toundi never lays any emphasis on the issues we know are most crucial to the author. His use of language shows no malice and all he seems to be interested in is to give as accurate a report as possible. Hence, in describing a despicable scene like that in the church, he comments about Father Vandermayer (an arch racist) who looks "superbe avec sa chasuble étincelante . . . " The poignant but smooth attack on the church may perhaps explain why Une vie de boy was accepted with less hostility than Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba, by the colonialists who certainly regarded the church as one of their most viable weapons of fostering their imperial designs.

Nevertheless, Oyono's verbal onslaught against the colonial

administrative and commercial sectors is more savage that Beti's. In Une vie de boy Toundi grows up in a world where racism is rampant and where the indigenous people are treated with utmost cruelty and barbarism: Janopoulos, the cruel and fleecing Greek merchant, sadistically creates fun and amusement for his white counterparts by letting his Alsatian dog chase and bite the ordinary black people when they mill around to see the new commandant. The agricultural engineer merely accepts the black woman, Sophie, who is girl friend, cum cook, as a repository or even an instrument for quenching his sexual desires, and, thus, he never admits to anyone that she is his lover or, at least, sexmate, and he even forbids her from calling him when he is in the company of other whites. With the exception of M. Salvain, the school teacher, who demonstrates some "liberalism", the rest of the European community are shown to be hard-core racists. Led by Gosier d'Oiseau, the fascist head of police, they compete among themselves in their verbal degradation of the African people and adopt a typical white supremacist line when they go to welcome the commandant's wife. The administration's segregationist policy also allows Gosier d'Oiseau to make unjustifiable "raids" on the local inhabitants, and during such scenes the latter are subjected to grave inhuman treatment. But this is not all. When the child-narrator, who is unwittingly led into the secret adulterous affair of M. Moreau and Mme. Decazy (the prison director and the commandant's wife), commits the unpardonable blunder of allowing his employers to realize that he knows part of their dirty, secret life, he is destroyed after an unspeakable travesty of justice labelled "investigation".

This enumeration of colonial corruption is necessary because it stresses the explosive nature of Oyono's subject matter, but it is a

tribute to the author's skill that he conquers any indictment of racism, europhobia or polemical ranting by his excellent use of the child as narrator. By making Toundi show fondness and admiration for his social superiors in the way he does, Oyono assures the reader of the narrator's reliability. The boy's profound excitement on both the announcement of and actual arrival of Mme. Decazy from France, his total disgust with Mme. Decazy's flirtatious affair with M. Moreau, the prison director, and his refusal to flee (even when he has been wisely advised by Kalisia, the chamber maid), are all manifestations of the affection and trust he has in his employers. The trustworthiness of the raconteur is further strengthened by the impersonal nature of his narration, even when it expresses intense suffering by him as when he is taken to see Gosier d'Oiseau:

> J'ai vomi du sang, mon corps m'a trahi. Je sens une douleur lancinante dans ma poitrine, on dirait que mes poumons sont pris dans un hameçon.
>
> Ce matin, Mendim m'a conduit chez Gosier d'Oiseau qui n'a d'abord rien voulu entendre sur mon mal.
>
> - On ne me couillonne pas facilement comme ça, disait-il en raidissant son cou, on ne me couillonne pas facilement, mon z'ami . . .
>
> (Boy p. 176)

Even though Toundi has been ferociously handled in all imaginable ways by Gosier d'Oiseau and others of his clique, his tone of voice is always assuredly under control (as in this passage), when reporting the events. Such a controlled form of narration not only gives the teller more credibility but also prevents the actual author Oyono, from "playing god." If this scene with Gosier d'Oiseau were related from an omniscient point of view, the temptation to make obstrusive normative comments about Gosier d'Oiseau's actions would be greater and this could easily make

the work read more like a political pamphlet than a literary work of art.

Discussing the various ways in which authorial silence can be maintained (this being one of the aims of both Beti and Oyono), Wayne Booth in his Rhetoric of Fiction declares that:

> By the kind of silence he maintains, by the manner in which he leaves his characters to work out their own destinies or tell their own stories, the author can achieve effects which would be difficult or impossible if he allowed himself or a reliable spokesman to speak directly and authoritatively to us.[14]

By making Denis and Toundi the reliable and "dramatized" narrators that they are, both Beti and Oyono, have, by the use of these children, been able to treat fiery problems with the artistic distance and finesse Booth has in mind here. More emphasis has, however, been put on Denis, the narrator in Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba because of the more complex way he is presented; this is probably due, as was hinted earlier, to the author's awareness that by putting the church under heavy fire as he does, he is attacking a more powerful pillar of the colonial establishment than even the administration and hence needs a compelling narrative technique to carry out his attack.

This is not to suggest that Oyono is an inferior artist, for although he was later to form a part of the neo-colonial regime in Cameroon after independence[15], he is in Une vie de boy, like Beti in Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba, quite aware of the nefarious practices of colonialists and, therefore, feels the need to decry them. As artists conscious of their craft, they carefully manipulate their narrators in ways that allow their message to be carried across with humour, while at the same time protecting themselves from charges of meddling with and misrepresenting reality.

NOTES

[1] Gerald Moore, "Mongo Beti: The voice of the rebel" in Seven African Writers (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) p. 76. Interest in Cameroonian literature is still of growing concern to African literature scholars; as evidence of this one can cite the colloquium on "Cameroonian literature and literary criticism" held at the University of Yaoundé on 18-22 April, 1977 (See Research in African Literatures 9:i, 1978, 79-86). It should also be pointed out that Cameroonian literature is the only national literature that will ever have had a whole half day devoted to it at an annual meeting of the "African Literature Association"; it is to be highlighted during the 9-12 April, 1980 meetings at the University of Florida, Gainesville (See African Literature Association Newsletter 5:3 Summer 1979) .2.

[2] Eza Boto, Ville cruelle (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1971). The original edition was published by Edition Africaine in 1954.

[3] Mongo Beti, Mission terminée (Paris: Correa-Buchet-Chastel, 1957).

[4] Mongo Beti, Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976). This novel was first published by Lafont Publishers in Paris in 1956. Page references are, however, to the 1976 edition which shall be abbreviated PCB after long quotations.

[5] Ferdinand Oyono, Une vie de boy (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1956). All references are to this edition which shall be abbreviated as Boy after long quotations.

[6] Ferdinand Oyono was born on 14 September, 1929 in Ngulemakong, Cameroon. His writing career started in 1956 when he published the two satiric novels for which he is well-known, Une vie de boy and Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille. He has been a diplomat for his country since 1960.

[7] There have been numerous studies on the colonial history of Cameroon but the following will suffice for our purpose:

Jean Imbert, Le Cameroun (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1973) pp. 32-49.

Victor Levine and Roger P. Nye, Historical Dictionary of Cameroon (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1974) pp. 132-37.

Engelbert Mveng, Histoire du Cameroun (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963) pp. 290-372

Ch. Wondji, "Approche socio-historique d'un roman africain. Une vie de boy de Ferdinand Oyono." Annales de l'Université d'Abidjan 7D (1974) 105-24.

8 The anti-clerical and anti-colonial themes have been treated by a large number of critics among whom the following can be mentioned:

Jingiri Achiriga, "Une vie de boy: procès du commandant" La Révolte des romanciers de langue française (Sherbrook: Naaman, 1973) pp.

Douglas Alexander, "Le tragique dans le romans de Ferdinand Oyono" Présence Francophone 7 (1963) pp. 24-30.

Thomas Cassirer, "The dilemma of leadership as tragi-comedy in the novels of Mongo Beti," L'Esprit Créateur 10 (1970) pp. 223-33.

Thomas Melone, Mongo Beti: L'homme et le destin (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1971).

William Umezinwa, "Révolte et création artistique dans l'oeuvre de Mongo Beti." Présence Francophone 10 (1975) pp. 35-48.

The stylistic virtuosity of both Beti and Oyono, especially in their use of irony, has also been emphasized in various articles:

Kwabena Britwum, "Irony and the paradox of idealism in Mongo Beti's Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba," Re Artes Libérales 6 ii (1972) pp. 48-68.

Fernando Lambert, "Narrative perspectives in Mongo Beti's Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba", Yale French Studies 53 (1976) pp. 381-94.

Russell Linnemann, "The anti-colonialism of Ferdinand Oyono" Yale French Studies 53 (1976) pp. 164-77.

9 The narrator's "innocence" is nearly always stressed in each of the articles or works mentioned above.

10 In 1974, Mongo Beti's Perpétue (Paris: Buchet and Chastel, 1974) was published, and in an article on this book, Robert P. Smith, Jr. postulates that the grimness of Perpétue, unlike Beti's other novels, shows "The seriousness of purpose and manner which the themes of politics and of women demand of the author..." (College Language Association Journal XIX 3 (1976), pp. 301-11.) According to Smith, a new Beti emerged with Perpétue. I won't take up this debate now but would rather suggest that if an older work like Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba is read with the fresh optics of Perpétue it will be seen that the theme of love is not really new in the writing of Beti. This was a question I discussed in a paper, "The Child-narrator and the theme of love in Mongo Beti's Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba", delivered at the 1978 annual meeting of the "African Literature Association" held at Indiana University, Bloomington.

[11] Kwabena Britwum, op cit. p. 51. Britwum is one of those critics who at times fails to see the double-edged irony employed by Beti.

[12] Both Thomas Cassirer and Fernando Lambert, op cit. make references to the process of "education" or "initiation" that takes place in Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba but they fail to show the direct link between the "love" theme and the "education" process.

[13] Russell Linneman, op cit. p. 71.

[14] Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961) p. 273.

[15] Eloïse Brière, "La Littérature Camerounaise: Nouvelles Tendances ou faux Espoirs", Peuples Noirs Peuples Africains 9 (mai-juin 1979) p. 78. Brière rightly mentions the collaboration of Oyono, who as Cameroon's Ambassador to France, gave assent to the banning of Mongo Beti's Main Basse sur le Cameroun (1972)--a political treatise attacking the Cameroonian government--in France in 1974.

CHAPTER III

The Child-Narrator as Autobiographer

In discussing the role of the child-narrator as diarist, I observed that because of both Beti's and Oyono's social preoccupations, these authors' treatment of childhood is mainly stylistic in their respective works. This observation should not lead one to infer that black authors who use children as narrators to comment on social issues merely regard these child-narrators as stylistic devices. I shall, therefore, in this chapter, demonstrate how Richard Wright, an Afro-American, and George Lamming, a Barbadian, manipulate both the thematic and stylistic aspects of childhood in their autobiographical novels--Black Boy[1] and In the Castle of my Skin[2]--to give expression to their social concerns.

Critics of Wright, including his biographer Constance Webb, have spotted out the personal details of the author in Black Boy, as these few examples which correspond to information given in the text will show: Wright was born in Natchez, Mississippi in 1908 to Nathan and Ella Wright. At age four the young boy accidentally burned down his grandmother's house, and the family later on had to move to Memphis, Tennessee. While in Memphis, Nathan Wright deserted the household to live with another woman. In order to combat the extreme state of poverty she and the children had been left in, Ella Wright found a job as a cook (which provided her with very meagre earnings), and tried legally, with no success, to get some financial support for the children from her estranged husband. When all her efforts failed, Ella handed her two sons

over to an orphanage, from which the young Wright fled. The names and descriptions of the author's relatives such as Granny, Aunt Maggie and Uncle Haskins, the constant moving from one place to another, the details of Wright's education and his eventual flight to Chicago have all been verified as authentic.[3]

Although the relevance of biographical criticism is best demonstrated when applied to a text such as Black Boy, it should not be over-emphasized. There are two main reasons for this cautionary note. First, if, as in R. B. Wellesley-Cole's Kossoh Town Boy (1960), the emphasis is unduly placed on the life history of the author and the portrayal of it in the novel, interpretations cluttered with sociological information and normative judgements about the mimetic rendering of events and the likelihood of truth are likely to come to the fore. Second, over-emphasis of biographical items would readily throw the work into the grips of 'existential' critics who would easily see Richard the narrator as a typical example of "alienated" twentieth century man, a forerunner of a black existentialist like Ralph Ellison.

My view is that by singling out and dwelling on his childhood and certain aspects of his family life, Wright consciously uses one family (the one he knows best) as a symbol to show the predicament of the majority of Afro-Americans before the civil rights movements and agitations of the 1960s. It should be stressed that Wright's evocation of childhood is one that represents that of most but not all Afro-Americans.

A brief glance at late chapters of Alex Haley's Roots[4], covering the same period and nearly the same setting as Black Boy verifies this assertion. In Haley's book, it is evident that the black family being described is socially miles above Richard's family in Black Boy. In

Roots, Bertha Palmer, who later on becomes Alex Haley's mother, has a completely different childhood from Richard, as this description shows:

> Bertha's father . . . had arranged that she had credit at every Henning store that sold candy, and he paid the bill each month, though he made her keep accounting, which he solemnly checked "to teach her business". As her fifteenth birthday present, when he opened a Sears, Roebuck mail-order account in her name, the people shook and wagged their heads in mingled astonishment, dismay--and pride . . . Later that same year, Will [Bertha's father], hired a teacher to come weekly all the way from Memphis to give Bertha piano lessons.
>
> (Roots pp. 698-99)

The story continues and shows how Bertha finishes high school, and, as should be expected, goes to college--a privilege denied then to most Afro-Americans. The environment and social attitudes that characterize Bertha's childhood stand as a marked contrast to Richard's in Black Boy. In this latter novel, poverty, violent racial discrimination and their concomittants seem to be the lot of American blacks.

Black Boy can, therefore, be regarded as a "roman à thèse" in which the novelist uses events in his own childhood and in his family to uncover the evils perpetrated against working class Afro-Americans, by white racial bigots, in the southern United States of the twenties. As with some other novelists dealing with social issues, Wright uses a boy-narrator, but it is necessary to point out from the outset, one major artistic weakness this novelist demonstrates in his use of this narrative strategy. All through the book, the distance between the author and his 'boy-narrator' is not clearly defined. This is most obvious in passages where the narrator tries to make philosophical pronouncements not likely to have been made by a boy. The point of view of the narrator often gets mixed up with what looks like the philosophical reflections of the adult-author. An example of this is seen just after the narrator says good-bye

to his friends in Natchez before moving to Jackson, Mississippi:

> After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness . . . and how shallow was even our despair . . . and when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native to man. I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled and suffered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another.
>
> (Black Boy p. 45)

Wright cannot seriously claim that these thoughts would have been coming from his young narrator's mind; this is the mature author expressing an opinion about what he considers to be the lack of virtues in the black man. In spite of this artistic weakness, however, it can be said that Black Boy still owes most of its strength to Wright's superb handling of the theme of childhood, for as we shall see, the novelist's social message becomes more poignant and meaningful to the reader because all the atrocities that take place in the novel are not only reported by, but do affect a child.

In Black Boy, the novelist is mindful of the fact that in spite of the 'abolition of slavery' and the 'proclamation of the four freedoms' in the United States, Afro-Americans had by virtue of the capitalist system been held under continued though altered slavery. One is, therefore, not surprised to see that in showing how this new form of slavery had operated and what damaging results it had produced, Wright resorted to a narrative form that had largely died away after the nineteenth century, "the Slave narrative". According to critics, the "Slave narrative" was an art form that had been developed by slaves during the period of slavery. It was normally the chronicle of events in the life

of a slave who, while enduring the ordeal of bondage, refused to conform to either of the two alternatives given to him--"acceptance of the fate of oppression" or "the apparent acquiescence of it through the conscious masking of feelings."[4] He often relied on himself for escape and freedom, as his desired goals. The first notable example of the "Slave narrative" is Oluadah Equiano's The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oluadah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African (1759). In this work (which was followed by hundreds of others), the narrator-hero paints a warm and realistic picture of his childhood in Benin before he was captured as a slave, his experiences and sufferings both in slave ships and in the new world as well as his ultimate escape to freedom.

Although by the beginning of this century, the "Slave narrative" had lost its popularity (perhaps due to suppression) in the American world of letters, Wright certainly felt the need for it in his Black Boy. He portrays Richard as the rebel in this modern slave society who refuses to accept the fatality of oppression, and who sees escape through his own efforts as the solution. The whole of Black Boy justifies this opinion but a precise example can be taken from a conversation Richard has with a white woman who has employed him as a boy:

> "What grade are you in school?"
> "Seventh, ma'am."
> "Then why are you going to school?" she asked in surprise.
> "Well, I want to be a writer," I mumbled, unsure of myself.
> I had not planned to tell her that, but she had made me feel so utterly wrong and of no account that I needed to bolster myself.
> "A what?" she demanded.
> "A writer," I mumbled.
> "For what?"
> "To write stories," I mumbled defensively.
> "You'll never be a writer," she said. "Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?"
> "Nobody," I said.

> "I didn't think anybody ever would," she declared indignantly.
> (Narrator) As I walked around her house to the street, I knew I would not go back.
>
> (Black Boy pp. 162-63)

The narrator's feeling of being insulted and his refusal to accept what this woman and the society consider to be the right thing for him are all demonstrative elements of the slave narrative.

If it is agreed, as was suggested earlier, that the novelist is using aspects of his childhood and the life of his family to demonstrate a thesis, it becomes easier to see why he resorts to the "Slave narrative" form in this twentieth century work. Wright has deliberately chosen a form of narration which is reflective of the lamentable social conditions of his time. But what makes the events described even more pathetic is the effect they have on the growing narrator.

The world of the narrator is shown to be a deprived world where poverty, misery and squalor are the lot of the black people. The reader gets the feeling of absolute destitution when Richard describes scenes like their living quarters in Memphis, where "living space" for the family of four is restricted to a kitchen and a bedroom; but the pathos of the situation lies not so much in the way it is described (for that could also have been achieved by an adult, omniscient narrator), as the effect it has on the teller who is but a child. A similar situation is seen in the episode where Richard, in trying to portray the indigent nature of his family, depicts hunger and the destructive effects it had on him, in these words:

> Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what Hunger really meant. Hunger has always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing by my bedside, staring at me gauntly. The hunger I had known

> before this had been no grim hostile stranger; it had been a normal hunger that had made me beg constantly for bread, and when I ate a crust or two I was satisfied. But this new hunger baffled me, scared me, made me angry and insistent . . . I would grow dizzy and my vision would dim. I became less active in my play . . .
>
> (Black Boy p. 21)

The personification of hunger in this passage certainly underscores its importance, but the terrible effect of this hunger (which would have been bad enough had it come from an adult), is multiplied by the fact that it is described by a child who has been a victim of such suffering. Richard's references to his begging for a 'crust or two' of bread, as well as to his becoming dizzy, less perceptive and unhealthy because of hunger, do forcefully bring out the dire consequences of poverty and oppression in the society.

Wright's insistance on hunger and its effects on the narrator (for instance, Richard runs away from the orphan home because of hunger, and later on he nearly sells his only pet in order to get some money to buy food), have more appeal to us because they affect a child. It should also be pointed out, however, that recurring references to hunger and suffering sound more credible when they are associated with a child. In fact, hunger looms so large in the novel that it nearly becomes a character in its own right. The main reason for this depiction of hunger is to show that the world of the narrator is a deprived world. 'Hunger' connotes 'craving' and 'yearning' that are more than physical and thus we are not surprised to see the child-narrator longing for better social, and intellectual environments.

It has been emphasized that the theme of childhood, much more than its stylistic use, is what Wright exploits to make his social comments, and it is perhaps in place now to compare briefly Wright's and other

novelists' treatment of the childhood theme to see the different but effective way Wright has manipulated it in order to revolt against the social order. Unlike Denis in Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba, or Toundi in Une vie de boy, the presentation of Richard in Black Boy is more straightforward and less ironical, but again in opposition to either of these two boy-narrators or to the hero of Wellesley-Cole's Kossah Town Boy, the narrator, Richard in Black Boy loses his innocence at a very early age. By the time he is six, the infant is a complete drunk and well-versed in the use of invectives. By showing a child of that age to be so perverse in his behaviour, Wright is succintly using the childhood theme to comment about the society's evils and its effects on the young. In this world "innocence" and "child" are in no way synonymous. Innocence is impossible and the novelist does not sentimentalize childhood. Rather, by allowing his narrator to describe the vices he is prone to (such as drinking, peeping in brothels and swearing), at a very early age, he invites the reader to see the direct effects of class exploitation and one of its accompanying traits, racism, more glaringly.

In the other novels treated so far, details of the narrators' lives within their immediate families are generally given minimum treatment; we scarcely know anything about Denis' relatives or their way of living in Le Pauvre Christ, and although some reference is made to Toundi's parents in Une vie de boy, the boy's role within the family is not stressed. In Black Boy, however, the topic of childhood is mainly demonstrated by the narrator's account of himself and his place within his immediate family environment. Through his description, we are made aware that Richard is growing up in a household dominated by fear, poverty and insecurity. Before the boy's father absconds he is portrayed

as an autocrat at home, thereby adding to the already suffocating atmosphere:

> He worked as a night porter in a Beale Street drug-store and he became important and forbidding to me only when I learned that I could not make noise when he was asleep in the daytime. He was the lawgiver in our family and I never laughed in his presence . . . He was always a stranger to me, always some how alien remote.
>
> (Black Boy p. 17)

The father becomes even more remote when he runs away from home to live with another woman, but although we admonish him for his parental irresponsibility, we must also regard this man as a product of the system. The narrator's father acquiesces to the demands of the racist Southerners and one way he shows this is the abandonment of his family. With the father gone and the mother receiving a mere pittance for a salary, before she falls ill and can no longer work, it nearly follows as a natural consequence that Richard should have had the upbringing he had. There are, however, other factors linked to the economic manipulation of blacks which make the narrator's childhood look quite bleak and negative.

When, at the start of Black Boy. Richard accidentally burns down his grandmother's house, one senses from the description given by the narrator that he is growing up in a very oppressive atmosphere; the boy is always restless, longing to do something but all he gets (and perhaps understandably so) from his mother are scoldings and threats. The room holds nothing of interest for him yet he is forced to stay in there and this leads him to divert his imaginative powers elsewhere; according to Sidonie Ann Smith:

> Richard, deprived of the normal outlets for his creative energies—running, playing, shouting, seeks an alternate form of self-affirmation.[6]

This 'seeking of an alternate form of self-affirmation' unfortunately happens to lead to the burning down of Richard's grandmother's house, but it should also be seen as an example of how Wright uses the childhood theme to bring out other themes. This house-burning episode which can be regarded as a mistake made by a child, is really an indicator to the many scenes in Black Boy where the narrator's power of imagination would become a source of constant trouble for him.

What seems to be one of Wright's major concerns in this work is the use of literacy as an effective weapon for the emancipation of his people. Throughout Black Boy, there is a dichotomy between illiteracy, which breeds ignorance and gullibility, and literacy, which has intelligent, if not scientific, thought as its consequence. In stressing the need for literacy as a means of liberating his people, Wright looks at the development of the child's creative potential as one way in which this can be done. Richard is thus shown to be quite incisive in hfs thoughts and actions.

Most characters in Black Boy accept racial oppression in a deterministic manner: Richard's friend, Griggs, suggests that Richard fails because, unlike Griggs himself, Richard does not demonstrate racial inferiority when he is around white people. Shorty, the lift boy, also accepts racial slurs and physical abuse as part of his daily existence. This fatalistic attitude towards the condition of black Americans is most powerfully shown among members of Richard's family. Granny, Aunt Addie and Richard's mother are portrayed as religious zealots of the worst kind. They totally lack imagination and they constantly try to impose religious dogma on the boy-narrator, and this is exemplified in the numberous clashes in Granny's house, but much

more so after Aunt Addie's graduation from the Seventh Day Adventist religious school in Huntsville, Alabama. Aunt Addie becomes a teacher in a religious school where Richard is forced to go, but where the boy rightly shows "a sullen appearance." It is worth dwelling upon some episodes in this school, for they show how Richard's intelligence, his powerful imagination and his constant desire to question things make him a misfit in the environment he grows up in.

Aunt Addie, whose religious fanaticism has deprived her of nearly all contacts with the real world, and who demonstrates profound ignorance of child psychology, goes into a frenzy one day when Richard legitimately denies having committed the heinous crime of throwing walnuts on the floor of the school, which according to Aunt Addie is 'God's holy ground,' She peremptorily and unjustifiably attempts to whip Richard, who, while pleading his innocence, nearly knifes her in self-defence. Because Aunt Addie is so insecure and lacking in imagination and tenderness, she nurtures a deep grudge and later on tries to get her revenge. The real problem in this encounter is not that Aunt Addie has such a high notion of ethics that she feels Richard should be punished for his "crimes"; it is mainly because the boy questions certain basic but wrong assumptions; he does not fit into the group of children in this religious school. The narrator's portrayal of these school children reflects not only his own but probably the author's contempt for religion. It also stresses again this call for the development of the imaginative powers of children:

> The pupils were a docile lot . . . These boys and girls were will-less, their speech flat, their gestures vague, their personalities devoid of anger, hope, laughter, enthusiasm, passion or despair . . . They were wholly claimed by their environment and could imagine no other . . .
>
> (Black Boy pp. 115-6)

The author disparages religion because he regards it as a major instrument that has been used to keep Afro-Americans in servitude, but he never makes any direct comment on this. Wright has no qualms about his contemptuous mimicry of the self-righteous religiosity propagated by both the narrator's grandmother and Aunt Addie, but all his scorn is never taken to be a personal pronouncement because it is filtered to the reader through the vision of the child-narrator:

> Granny made it imperative, however, that I attend certain all-night ritualistic prayer meetings. She was the oldest member of her church and it would have been unseemly if the only grandchild in her home could not be brought to these important services; she felt that if I were completely remiss in religious conformity it would cast doubt upon the staunchness of her faith, her capacity to convince and persuade, or merely upon her ability to apply the rod to my backside . . .
> During the passionate prayers and the chanted hymns I would sit squirming on a bench, longing to grow up so I could run away . . .
>
> (Black Boy P. 123)

The narrator's reporting of such an incident does help to show Wright's rejection of the church, but the savage ridicule Christianity is subject to in Black Boy comes about largely as a result of Wright's thematic handling of his narrator's childhood. Because the narrator's home life has been a recurrent subject in the novel, events such as when Granny and her crew try to 'convert' Richard are accepted by the reader as normal, everyday happenings. There is no reason why the narrator would make up such stories against his relatives. This 'conversion' episode shows Christianity, not as a religion which demands that human beings show compassion and understanding toward their fellow human beings, but as an oppressive, unsympathetic and hypocritical force. Richard's grandmother lays all kinds of snares to trap the boy into accepting the hypocritical religious belief: the family, which

had hitherto been hostile and unkind to Richard, suddenly "become kind and forgiving". Some of Richard's classmates who had been warned to avoid him since he was considered a reprobate also become friendly, and when one of his friends fails in the conversion bid, Granny and others deliberately concoct a story about Richard having seen an angel--a falsehood which the "sinner" obviously denies. Granny then tries cajolery and parental manipulation, but to no avail, and we are thus not surprised that Granny and Aunt Addie soon change and re-adopt their hostility towards Richard. They refer to him as a lost cause and ironically but significantly tell him that "they [Granny and her crew] were dead to the world, and those of their blood who lived in that world were therefore dead to them."

In the description of these scenes the novelist shows (especially through dialogue) that Richard's vision goes beyond the narrow, religious world of his relatives. Wright is stressing the point that in the world of the narrator, religion is one of the instruments that has been used to sap the intellectual lives of people. He reinforces this view by making Richard who is a child (and is considered stupid), enunciate the right ideas. The child does not believe in a utopia after death and, therefore, unlike his relatives, he does not accept the slings and arrows which have been imposed upon them.

Mention has already been made of Wright's confused presentation of 'points of view' in Black Boy. It is true that we would like to have seen more consistent shifts in point of view, but this should not blind us to the artistic merits of Black Boy, for, by the author's ingenious manipulation of the theme of childhood, we are able to empathize with the protagonist-narrator, and this is, in fact, one of the major links

between Black Boy

between Black Boy and George Lamming's In the Castle of my Skin.

George Lamming was born in 1927 in the village of Carrington, Barbados. After a spell of school teaching in Trinidad and creative writing for Bim, a popular West Indian magazine, Lamming emigrated to England in 1950, and in 1953 he published his first novel In the Castle of my Skin.

Many autobiographical facts of the novelist's life have been identified in In the Castle of my Skin as a few examples will show: The narrator in this novel, like the author, is called George, and he grows up in a village called Creighton Village. Both novelist and narrator eventually go to England, and even an event like the strike by workers in Creighton Village is an artistic representation of a strike that actually took place in 1937-38.[7]

What strikes the reader in Lamming's novel, however, is the way the author (as Richard Wright did in Black Boy) uses his own childhood to give a concrete, detailed depiction of a people. From the start of In The Castle of my Skin, the world of the child figures quite prominently. Even though the expository opening pages describe the village, its people and so on, the focus is mainly on the narrator and his peers. One reason why Lamming gives so much attention to the children from the outset is because it is largely through this theme that the other important subjects such as the anti-colonial and class exploitation themes are brought out; for this reason, the theme of childhood will be treated in greater detail.

Childhood is powerfully portrayed in the first six chapters of In The Castle of my Skin, mainly by the narrator's rendering of the every-day activities of himself and his friends. In this section, the hopes,

fears and expectations of the children are clearly documented; they see themselves as people who should be loved and taken care of, and for that reason the young George is disappointed when his poor mother cannot offer him a present on his ninth birthday. When their mothers are annoyed with them, both George and his pal, Bob, acknowledge the legitimacy of this annoyance and also the love their mothers have for them.

One effective method Lamming employs to impress the theme of childhood in the reader's mind is the creation of realistically convincing children. The innocence and naiveté of George and other children are carefully displayed, and are, in fact, fully used to upbraid the system. But the novelist does not make saints out of these children either; they are shown to be, as most real-life children are, rascally and wily, and this portrayal makes us believe that we are not merely dealing with stock characters or types.

At the start of In the Castle of my Skin, the narrator recounts Miss Forster's encounter with Mr. Creighton, the "Landlord" of Creighton Village. Miss Forster, whose house has been swept away by floods, finally manages to see Mr. Creighton. During their discussion, the Landlord gives Miss Forster a dole of a gift and the woman accepts it as something of substance; she also regards Mr. Creighton's skilful, patronizing and exploitative enunciations as genuine manifestations of benevolence and she praises the "good man" for his "good works." There is no doubt that Lamming is attacking the colonial system and the attitude of the colonialists, whose constant assumption was that a little pittance for subsistence, would always keep the colonized under control; the novelist, however, refrains from soap-box rhetoric by allowing his narrator to report incidents [such as this one between the Landlord and Miss Forster] in a rather childish, disinterested manner. This unbiased kind of reporting,

which shows Lamming's stylistic treatment of childhood, is crystallized in the narrator's account of Empire Day celebrations; without subjecting George to any censure, Lamming lambastes the colonial system with unmistakable irony when he makes the narrator speak of the relationship between England and Barbados (Little England), in these terms:

> On all sides the walls were crowded with people . . . Now it was a king. But the throne was the same. Good old England Little England. They had never parted company since they met way back in the reign of James or was it Charles? . . . Barbados or Little England was the oldest and purest of England's children, and may it always be so . . .
>
> (Castle p. 37)

These views, which might have sounded strange from an adult Barbadian, seem quite natural and acceptable from a colonized schoolboy; and the reader finds no fault either in the uncritical way in which the narrator recounts the condescending speeches made during the celebrations by both the regional school inspector and the village school headmaster. Both of them in a typically pompous and falsifying manner extol British imperialism; the inspector speaks of the children's loyalty to the Empire and about the job assigned to his imperial Lords by God, and he ends by flatteringly comparing the Barbadian school performance with that of "the lads at home," meaning England. The headteacher also continues to heap praises on the Empire and especially on the "great old Queen Victoria." In all of these episodes which depict Lamming's anti-colonial position, the controlled, "naive" tone of voice of the narrator, prevents the work from becoming a mere political treatise on colonialism.

Linked with this anti-colonial theme is another theme that is often found in Caribbean writing, i.e. the theme of the past. According to Arthur Kemoli, the present landscape of the West Indies is not considered

as original home by most West Indians, since the black inhabitants who constitute the greater part of the West Indian population are descendants of slaves who were originally uprooted and transported from Africa. It is no wonder, therefore, that the West Indian writer is preoccupied with his past.[8]

Lamming does not preach a negritudinal sermon about those wonderful gone-by times in "native Africa," but through the medium of the children in In the Castle of my Skin, he makes us know that the "Prosperos" of the Caribbean had deliberately tried to blur historical reality, as this narration about Queen Victoria, by George, again during the Empire Day celebration shows:

> But the old people on the wall had talked about the Queen [Victoria] in another way. They had talked about her as a good Queen because she freed them. That's what they said, a little boy was repeating. They said she made us free, you and me and him and you . . . One boy said he had asked the teacher, but the teacher said he didn't know what the old people were talking about. They might have been getting dotish.
>
> (Castle p. 56)

When another little boy brings out the information an old woman had given him about slavery, the teacher dismisses the boy with a lie, "no one there was ever a slave . . . It was in another part of the world that those things had happened. Not in Little England." In those scenes, Lamming utilizes the children's artlessness to the full and hence after naively relating the efforts that had been made to suppress or distort historical truth, the little boy concludes "Thank God nobody in Barbados was ever a slave."

The mocking distance maintained by the author is evident and it becomes even more pronounced when a young lad whose mother is obviously a Sunday School teacher, tries to rationalize slavery in terms of Pauline

dogma. According to this boy, Barbadians are still slaves and this is so because their ancestors had joined Lucifer in rebelling against God who had thus chased them away from the Garden of Eden. Queen Victoria had hence "freed" them because she wanted them to realize the significance of the Empire, and Lamming's biting sarcasm surfaces more openly when he makes the boy conclude his spurious explanation with these words:

> We are slaves. We are still slaves to these two. The Empire and the garden. And we are happy to be slaves. It isn't the same as being a prisoner. But it is different when you are a slave. When you are a slave of the Empire and the garden at the same time, you can be free to belong to both . . . My mother who is a Sunday School teacher has explained it well. There is nothing for us to do, she tells me, but rejoice in our bondage. That is what she calls it. She doesn't say slave. She says bondage. When the time comes we shall be taken out of bondage by what she calls grace. That's not a girl she is talking about. It's something else. It's a sort of salvation. That's what she says sometimes. Salvation through grace.
>
> (Castle pp. 71-2)

The boy's use of short staccato sentences, his preference for the high-blown "bondage" instead of "slave" and also the way he makes a distinction between Grace, a girl's name, and "grace", a religious concept, all help to show that those are thoughts coming out of a juvenile mind. Lamming introduces comedy here, reminds us that we are in the world of children and, at the same time, treats a serious theme. He makes sure there is always a certain distancing from the points of view of the various characters including the narrator and other children.

Up to this point the narrator's world has been shown as one in which the ills of colonialism are exposed, but this is not all that is in In the Castle of my Skin. In this novel, Lamming also probes into the class question--a problem that was to confront former colonies, even more glaringly, after they had been granted "independence." Most post-

independence "political" novels, with a few exceptions like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood, have often ignored the class nature of politics and corruption and have merely been centred on political corruption and the abuse of power and privilege by individuals.[9] The novelist certainly deserves credit for having highlighted the problem of class exploitation in his society even at that relatively early stage of Caribbean writing.

Part of Lamming's thesis is that the world in which the child-narrator grows up in is not merely dominated by colonialist exploiters but also by the rising national petty bourgeoisie (not bourgeoisie, as Ian Munro says),[10] who often collude with foreigners in the fleecing of their fellow nationals. This view is mainly borne out by Mr. Slime (whose Dickensian name is symbolic of his character), the schoolteacher who quit the teaching profession after his liaison with his boss's wife was accidentally brought to light by one of the pupils.

When Mr. Slime starts "the pennybank and friendly society", most of the people in Creighton's village, except for a few cynics like old Ma, see their salvation in him. In the discussion Old Pa and Old Ma have about the situation in the village after the strike, Old Ma's unstinted religious conviction as well as her conservatism wouldn't allow her to accept Mr. Slime as their saviour; unlike what Old Pa thinks, she does not agree that it is right or fair to equate Mr. Slime and the biblical Moses. Old Ma cannot see how Mr. Slime can save them when he is not God-elect, but the progressive though confused sentiments of Old Pa make him pin more hopes on Mr. Slime, who, by posing as a "socialist" union leader, skillfully ingratiates himself into the confidence of the people. The workers go on strike, relying on Mr. Slime to negotiate

for them, but all this rank opportunist does is work his way into the class of "the great" by betraying the confidence of the people. We see this treachery in its most glaring form when, instead of giving the strikers his most needed endorsement when they want to attack the Landlord and owner of the shipping company, Mr. Creighton, Mr. Slime adopts the cowardly posture of "compromise". When Mr. Creighton escapes, Lamming's ire at tricksters like Mr. Slime is voiced out by George. But again, as in most of the scenes, the moral comment and indignation do not degenerate into bare polemics because of the narrative angle from which they are seen. The narrator describes the scene referred to as follows:

> Then all eyes [eyes of the strikers] were fixed on Mr. Slime. His head spun with the terror and confusion of the scene. He didn't know what he should do. The men looked like beasts without reason. He wondered whether he should dare risk an order not to fire. They watched his face for a signal as the Landlord tottered exhausted and stupid through the wood . . . Mr. Slime sighed as he reached the men who looked disappointed, angry and above all obedient. "Thank you," he said, "I'm glad you didn't do it." Some of them dropped their stones and held their heads down.
>
> (Castle pp. 207-8)

As should be expected, the people never regain their rights and some of them, including Old Pa, are dispossessed. The Landlord consolidates his position and, in collaboration with Slime, the headmaster and some other members of the spineless, exploitative petty bourgeois class bring the ruin of the villagers to its final phase. What is remarkable in this examination of class exploitation, however, is Lamming's brilliant use of point of view. In the description of Mr. Slime's timid refusal to support the strikers' attack of the Landlord, one senses a certain sympathy on the part of the narrator for Mr. Slime. This feeling

comes out clearly in comments such as "His head [Slime's] spun with the terror and confusion of the scene. He didn't know what he should do. The men looked like beasts without reason." This young narrator who had all his lifetime been used to seeing the Landlord in command, rightfully sees the scene of workers wanting to attack Mr. Creighton as a confused one and the workers as senseless creatures, but we know that these are not the novelist's views.

Lamming has acknowledged his personal involvement in In the Castle of my Skin when, in an interview he said, among other things:

> The relation of the artist to the drama of politics is in fact one of the basic themes running through everything I write . . . I find it very difficult to see how a writer of serious intention cannot be organically related to the political movement of that society in the widest sense.[11]

Although the writer indicates his relationship with the work, I feel he gives his narrator credibility by effectively blending his views with those of his narrator at times and at other times maintaining an aesthetic distance. The reader is always reminded that the narrator is a child and this is not merely shown by isolated "naive" or "innocent" statements but by the escapades of George and his compeers. We see how George's friends relish the sight of his nakedness at the time the boy's mother is busy trying to give him a bath, they poke so much fun at him that Bob's mother gets annoyed and there is near-disaster when, in a bid to punish her son, Bob's mother falls into George's compound, together with the fence dividing the two compounds. Miss Forster narrates "the botheration" the children bring to their parents when she gives an account of how Gordon (one of George's pals) had soiled up a white man's face with fowl excrement and also how the policeman who had come to make enquiries after the incident had been duped by the children. Bob nearly drowns

when they go on a swimming and crab-catching spree, without their parent's consent. They are also nearly caught red-handed when they creep in to spy on the activities of "the great", and even in the midst of severe fighting in the village, Bob and Trumper sneak from their individual homes into the city to get first-hand information. Lamming shows good knowledge of child psychology by the way he makes his narrator describe both the pranks and prates of children and this knowledge is often utilized to bring out other themes. A perfect example can be seen in the unmasking of some religious sects.

The anonymous child who is hypnotized into "confessing" and being "converted" into religion obviously does so merely as a result of the persistent wheedling by the religious authorities, and Lamming registers his disgust with such pharisaical gestures by pietistic bigots by making the narrator and his allies react stubbornly against this attempt to force religion down peoples' throats, Unlike the "converted" boy, Trumper, Boy Blue and George understand what the gestures of the church leader and his followers mean, so the boys decide to have none of it. In spite of the hypocritical glares the boys get from some of the faithful at the religious gathering, George and others refuse any "spiritual change" and, in fact, Trumper articulates their whole view (and very likely that of the author as well), about religion and life when he hits out thus:

> Tis what Mr. Slime say . . . they turn us dotish with all these nancy stories 'bout born again, an' we never ever give ourself a chance to get up an' get. Nothin' ain't goin' change here till we sort o' stop paying notice to that sort o' joke 'bout a old man goin' born again. It ain't only stupid but it sound kind of nasty,.... . And he call it tomfoolery. "Tis what got us as we is, he say.
>
> (Castle p. 167)

This speech by Trumper is significant because it shows how the boy's power of perception is developing, as is seen in his total and justifiable rejection of the sham religious doctrine being espoused by the priest and congregation here. Lamming's portrayal of Trumper from this scene onwards clearly shows that the novelist looks up to level-headed youth for the redemption of his country. Trumper goes to the United States for a while and on his return he becomes a true mentor for the narrator, George. He explains to George the nature of class exploitation in either big cities like New York City or in a small village like Creighton Village. Trumper also makes George realize that he could now see through miry characters like Mr. Slime and he expresses this very concisely when he says:

> But that's life. 'Tis the way of the world, an' in a world ó' slimes there ain't no way out for those who don't know how to be slimy.
>
> (Castle p. 286)

Behind Trumper's utterances we also suspect the author's voice, helping to pour venom on the slimes of society. Trumper's explanation of these basic issues such as class domination, racism in the States, the tranquilizing effect of religion, help to open the narrator's eyes which had hitherto been half-closed to reality, and hence George leaves Barbados with a much more enlightened mind about his people, the relationship between classes and so forth. Lamming's final note, therefore, seems to be that, whether in his native Barbados or abroad, the younger generation (as exemplified by Trumper and the narrator respectively), will help make their country a place worth living for its people.

Throughout this chapter, my interest has been centred on Wright's and Lamming's respective treatments of childhood, both as a theme and as a technique, to bring out a social message. However, this discussion

will be incomplete if mention is not made of the fact that, by presenting both Richard and George as autobiographers, the authors of Black Boy and In the Castle of my Skin were emphasizing an aspect of childhood in black writing which is a recent phenomenon, historically. (Even in French literature, for instance, it was only in the early part of the twentieth century that writers like Saint-John Perse, Colette and others started giving the creative powers of the child their due respectability). In both of the novels I have considered in this chapter, the narrator's creative genius is constantly stressed and this is surely one way the two authors show the importance of childhood in their works.

NOTES

[1] Richard Wright, Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth (New York: Harper and Row, 1966). The original text was published by Harper and Brothers in 1945, but all my references are to the 1966 edition. For the sake of clarity I shall differentiate between Richard Wright, the author, and Richard, his narrator, by referring to them as Wright and Richard respectively.

[2] George Lamming, In the Castle of my Skin (London: Longman Drumbeat, 1979). My references are to this 1979 edition which gives the complete text of the original, published in 1953 by Michael Joseph. I shall distinguish the narrator from the author by simply referring to the narrator as George and the author as Lamming. The novel's title will also be abbreviated as Castle after all long quotations.

[3] Much biographical research has been done on Richard Wright, especially in connection with Black Boy; the following can be seen as a representative sample of such biographical criticism:

Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography (New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1968), Chapters I-IV.

Blyden Jackson, "Richard Wright: Black Boy from America's Ghettos." College Language Association Journal XII 4, (June, 1969) pp. 287-97.

Russell Brignano, Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and his Works, (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1970), pp. 3-15.

[4] Alex Haley, Roots: The Saga of an American Family (New York: Dell, 1976), pp. 698-702.

[5] Arna Bontemps, Great Slave Narratives (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). p. vii.

Sidonie Ann Smith, "Richard Wright's Black Boy: The Creative Impulse as Rebellion." The Southern Literary Journal V i, (1972), p. 123.

[6] Smith, p. 127.

[7] Ian H. Munro, "The Theme of Exile in George Lamming's In the Castle of my Skin." World Literature Written in English, 20, (1971) pp. 51-2.

[8] Arthur Kemoli, "The Theme of 'the past' in Caribbean Literature." World Literature Written in English, 12, (1973), pp. 304-25.

[9] In the mid and late 1960s, the exposure of political and intellectual frauds became a dominant theme in post-colonial and especially African literature: Achebe, in A Man of the People (London: Heinemann, 1966), Robert Serumaga in Return to the Shadows (London: Heinemann, 1969) and T. M. Aluko in Chief The Honourable Minister, (London: Heinemann, 1970), all treat this theme. It was, however, not until Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood (London: Heinemann, 1977) was published that we have a further exploration of the class question, which had been started in the pre-independence era by writers like Lamming and the Senegalese, Sembene Ousmane, who had treated this issue in his Les Bouts de bois de Dieu, a novel first published in 1960.

[10] Munro, p. 52.

[11] Munro, p. 55, quotes this particular statement from an unpublished interview the novelist had given at the University of Texas, at Austin, in October, 1970.

CHAPTER IV

The Child-Narrator as Cynic

Among post-colonial writers, V. S. Naipaul (born 1932), whose grandparents emigrated from India to Trinidad, ranks among the most celebrated. This is obvious not only from his prolific writings--which include at least eight novels, two novellas, two travelogues, one book of history and scores of articles on historical, political and literary concerns--but also from the international recognition he has received on the basis of his works. He has been awarded several prizes among which are the Somerset Maugham Award (1959), the Hawthorden Prize (1963), and the prestigious Booker Prize (1971).

In spite of these tributes to his literary merit, Naipaul has been at the centre of a great controversy revolving around the artist--especially the artist from a developing country--and his role in his society. Critics of Naipaul have generally been divided into two camps; for some of them, the dominant concern has been his artistry, and for this, they have sung his praises. David Ormerod, for instance, says that Naipaul "is by now recognized as the most talented of those West Indian novelists who have appeared on the literary scene since the publication in 1949 of V. S. Reid's New Day."[1] Another critic echoes similar sentiments when he suggests that Naipaul "is very possibly the best of the younger British novelists . . . "[2] There are still other critics, however, who, while acknowledging the novelist's literary skill, reprimand him severely for his shallow and even reactionary social vision. They

regard Naipaul as nothing but a neo-colonialist stooge who receives payment and laurels from his imperialist patrons[3], and this view is given even clearer expression by Naipaul's fellow West Indian, George Lamming who described Naipaul's writings in these terms:

> His books can't move beyond a castrated satire; and although satire may be a useful element in fiction, no important work comparable to Selvon's can rest on satire alone. When such a writer is a colonial, ashamed of his cultural background and striving like mad to prove himself through promotion to the peaks of a 'superior' culture whose values are gravely in doubt, then satire, like the charge of philistinism, is for me nothing more than a refuge.[4]

Two questions which need further probing emerge from these views: Is Naipaul an artist whose consumate skill and artistic preoccupation have won him due praise but at the same time baffled some critics, or is this novelist's representation of reality a carefully distorted one which brings admiration for him from quarters which value such descriptions?

I will attempt to answer these questions by using Miguel Street[5], the first novel to be written, though the third to be published by Naipaul. The major reason this novel has been chosen is that among Naipaul's works, Miguel Street gives the most extensive treatment of the theme of childhood. One also notices that though the setting of the novel is restricted to only one area of Trinidad society, i.e. a slum area in Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad, there is a whole paraphernalia of characters and incidents reflecting the everyday life of people, and thus through a child's eyes we see almost an entire society. Another reason why Miguel Street is especially appropriate for this thesis is that it is often used by some critics (especially defenders of Naipaul), to justify the author's demonstration of sympathy towards the Trinidadian people.[6] This is a view that becomes untenable if the 'point

of view' in this novel is analyzed.

Miguel Street is indeed the story of a young boy's growing up into manhood, for by the end of the story the eight-year old narrator is now eighteen and is on his way to Britain for further studies. In this series of sketches which make up the book, the boy-narrator gives a concise description of characters and events and their effects on his life during his ten-year stay in Port of Spain.

In order to bring out the childhood theme, Naipaul attributes certain naive or "innocent" patterns of behaviour to the narrator and his peers which the reader readily recognizes as characteristic of children. The superb use of the narrator's naiveté is shown from the outset when he comments, "Being a child, I never wondered how Bogart [an adult character] came by any money. I assumed that grown-ups had money as a matter of course." It is this native candour that is shown again in the narrator's outright "bush" behaviour on board the bus in Port of Spain, the first time the narrator and his mother move into the city from the small town, Chagnanas:

> It was the first time I had travelled in a city bus.
> I said to my mother, "Ma, look, they forget to ring
> the bell here."
> My mother said, "If you ring the bell you damn well
> going to get off and walk home by yourself, you hear."
> And then a little later I said, "Ma, look, the sea."
> People in the bus began to laugh.
>
> (MS p. 71)

Such childlike naiveté is reflected again in the boy's admiration of local "heroes" like Eddoes, the skilled "aristocrat" of a cart driver, Man-man, the neurotic, and also in discussions such as this between the narrator and other boys of Miguel Street:

> Errol, Boyee and myself sat on the pavement
> discussing the war. Errol said, "If they just make

> Lord Anthony Eden Prime Minister, we go beat up the Germans and them bad bad.
> Boyee said, "What Lord Eden go do so?
> Errol just haaed in a knowing way.
> I said, "Yes, I always think that if they make Lord Anthony Eden Prime Minister, the war go and quick quick."
> Boyee said, "You people just don't know the Germans. The Germans strong like hell, you know. A boy was telling me that these Germans and them could eat a nail with their teeth alone.
>
> (MS pp. 58-9)

This passage clearly shows Naipaul's brilliant manner of detaching himself from his characters when he wants to, for as we see, the views expressed here are effusions of infantile minds and do not reflect the opinions of the author. It also shows how the author succeeds in using vernacular realism and not just "quaint language" for its own sake[7], the quality of language used by the children coincides with the level of sophistication of the ideas they express about the war. Childhood is further emphasized by descriptions of boyish capers such as playing cricket on the pavement and the gum-begging incident between the narrator and the American soldier.

Now, whereas Naipaul, like Beti, Oyono, Wright, or Lamming, deserves a beta plus for his presentation of childhood and his unquestionable mastery of language, he, unlike these authors, certainly merits a beta double minus for his negative social comment. Miguel Street indisputably portrays the coming of age of a young boy but this is not all there is to the story. It can be seen as the methodical degradation of a people by one of their fellow compatriots who happens to be a writer. For us to get the reasons for such a harsh view of Naipaul clearer, we have to look at some opinions expressed about this novelist by an authority on him, R. D. Hamner, as well as by Naipaul himself. According to Hamner:

> Naipual is the kind of artist whose personal outlook and experience merge distinctly with everything he writes, whether fiction or non-fiction.[8]

Hamner also maintains that "Naipaul's penchant for involvement, for 'relating literature to life' can hardly be overemphasized."[9] If, as Hamner claims, Naipual has an inclination towards using literature as a mirror of life, then what are Naipaul's views of Trinidad (the setting of Miguel Street) in real life? The answer to this is found partly in a response he gave to a question about how environment had changed his imagination:

> Coming from a place like Trinidad, which I always felt existed on the edge of the world, far away from everything else, not only physically but also in terms of culture, I felt that I had to try very hard to rejoin the old world.[10]
>
> [my emphasis]

Indeed Naipaul uses his child-narrator and the theme of childhood to re-create this distorted view of Trinidad which he confesses he has. The narrator, who can be seen as a symbol of boundless ego, seems to represent Naipaul himself, especially from the manner he regards the other characters; for him these characters (male and female, children as well as adults) are mere incompetents. In this society that is presented to us, all of the people fail in an inverse proportion to the narrator's success. These people are often either made to appear as buffoons from the outset or, if they do genuinely aspire towards and try to achieve a station higher than the one they were born into, they only end in woeful failure. Bogart, the tailor, and Popo, the carpenter, have two main traits in common with most of the other adult characters presented in the novel: they do not know the trades they are supposed to be practising and they are great eccentrics. In the narrator's words:

> Bogart . . . bought a sewing machine and some blue

> and white and brown chalks. But I never could imagine him competing with anyone; and I cannot remember him making a suit. He was a little like Popo, the carpenter next door, who never made a stick of furniture, and was always planning and chiselling and making what I think he called mortises.
>
> (MS p. 10)

Just as Bogart and Popo fail to be productive so do the other characters; George is shown to be a stupid ruffian who brutalizes his family and who only succeeds in bullying his son Elias into a sullen docile lad, and his daughter Dolly into an obtuse, giggling girl. In Miguel Street, the best the most ambitious child can hope for is to become either a scavenging cart driver (ironically labelled "aristocrat" by Naipaul) or a sanitary inspector. No wonder, therefore, that in spite of Elias' deep devotion to his school work and his ambition, he is never able to make a second grade in the Senior Cambridge school certificate examinations--a grade which would enable him to pursue higher studies and become a doctor. After numerous attempts, without success, of course, to pass this examination, Elias resorts to the less sophisticated and apparently less difficult sanitary inspector examinations, but here again after five ludicrous attempts, which include some in Guyana and Barbados, he still fails and he thus has to abandon the idea of ever progressing through success in examinations. It is significant that Naipaul captions the chapters in which this episode is related as "His Chosen Calling." By exaggerating Elias' "stupidity" to the point that he does, Naipaul is implicitly criticising this young boy for attempting to choose a calling which would mean rising above a nearly genetically determined status. According to Naipaul, the 'chosen calling' of every boy in Miguel Street, with the exception of the narrator, was to be a cart driver or less. How can Elias then presumptuously aspire

to become a doctor? There is the strong suggestion here that Naipaul is giving full endorsement to the rigid class stratification that novelists like Dickens had deplored about a century before. He seems to be suggesting that those born in slums should never even aspire to get out of the ghettoes.

Apologists for Naipaul have, naturally, been quick to suggest that this novelist has been misunderstood. One reviewer of Naipaul's works claims that "the wit, irony, and sophistication of his early works [which include Miguel Street, of course], were mistaken for irresponsible satire. As Naipaul has said you don't need to satirize some aspects of the West Indian scene, and he has to understate the farcical elements rather than exaggerate them."[11] Taking off from this initial premise about the peculiarly inherent, "farcical" characteristics of Trinidadian life, David Ormerod continues by affirming that:

> . . . Naipaul has consciously invoked comedy in order to say something deeply and seriously felt about a social predicament. Naipaul himself has told us, in a characteristically cautious fashion, that his works aim at social comment and criticism. He does not seek to produce documentary propaganda but nevertheless sees the act of literary creation as being deeply involved with the desire of a quasi-sociological nature.[12]

What kind of social comment does Naipaul make and who are his objects of criticism? If the presentation of a whole stream of helpless, ordinary people as imbeciles can be regarded as a social comment, then Miguel Street can be regarded as a valuable social document, but not valuable to the people it wrongfully portrays. What we actually get in this novel is an excellent use of caricature for the purpose of satisfying a particular class of people, the oppressive ruling class, the class that awards the literary prizes Naipaul so frequently receives.

Characters in Miguel Street become poor caricatures of their real-life and fictitious counterparts: Hat and Bogart are shown to be very cheap imitations of the film stars they represent; after the normal display of antics, Man-man adopts a religious pose and becomes a Trinidadian "Jesus Christ" with the sole difference that he cannot bear the crucifixion, hence, Christ's "Eli Eli Lama Sabachtani" becomes "Look, get me down from this thing quick. Let me down quick, and I go settle with that son of a bitch who pelt a stone at me." Black Wordsworth resembles his romantic counterpart in some ways: he loves nature and succumbs to its influence, but he turns out to be a poetaster whose greatest poem is made up of a single and rather meaningless line, "the past is deep," which he spends a whole month writing. Bhacku "the mechanical genius" shows his uncommon knowledge of automobile engineering by tearing down the parts of every vehicle he buys, at times beyond repairs. His mania for fidgeting with the parts of his vehicles is only matched by his capacity for making wrong decisions. For instance, when on his wife's advice he buys a lorry, Bhacku does not only ruin the lorry's starter for good, but he crashes into the concrete fence, and as we should by now suspect, the lorry yields no profit because lorries are practically useless by the time he buys his. When Bhacku sells the lorry and purchases a taxi cab instead, it is the exact opposite result he gets: lorries now start making enormous profits whereas taxis become redundant. Parallel to Bhacku's failure is his wife's misjudgement; she mistakenly advises her husband to go into the transport business which yields no gains, and when she attempts being a trader of hens and fruits consecutively, the result is foreseen, she fails.

One would have thought that for a writer who purports to be making

a social comment in his work, Naipaul would show some sympathy towards these people or at least try to analyze the causes of their failure in society. He does neither of these, but rather uses his narrator as a mouthpiece to deride the Trinidadians who are shown here to be nothing but cretins. Big Foot does not limit his circus-like behaviour to calling the narrator nick-names or throwing stones unwarrantedly at the Radio Trinidad Building; he makes a complete mess of himself when he is employed as a bus driver, and demonstrates tremendous untrustworthiness when he becomes a postman. When finally Big Foot goes into boxing he is easily humiliated by the English boxer who only turns out to be an imposter. Morgan, "the pyrotechnicist", is shown to be a big jester who opens both himself and his family to molestation and ridicule as is seen in the mock-court scene, in which he presides as "judge" and members of his family play the grotesque role of "accused", He soon disappears with the dangerous fireworks which are his great "invention."

What might have been regarded as a redeeming feature of Naipaul's attitude towards the Trinidadian people is his demonstration of fellow-feeling among the characters of Miguel Street. Hat, Titus Hoyt, B. Wordsworth and Laura are among the characters who not only show conviviality among themselves as adults but also friendship towards the children in the novel. The boy-narrator comments on Laura's affableness and generosity towards him and others in a very positive way:

> I don't think a woman like Laura could have ever had too many children. She loved all her children, though you wouldn't have believed it from the language she used when she spoke to them.
>
> (MS p. 85)

More comments like these from the narrator would have shown that the author has a sympathetic attitude towards the people and that he distances

himself from his narrator who regards all of the other characters as children, incompetents and beasts. Unfortunately, this not so; Naipaul, who has immense command of stylistic devices such as irony does nothing to dissociate his views from those of his narrator, at least for the greater part of Miguel Street

Although Laura is shown to be warm and kind towards other people, what is stressed in her case is her propensity towards having children for different irresponsible louts who pose as fathers. The novelist could, through double irony or through the use of a multiple points of view, have directed criticism at Laura for her gullibility, and certainly at these men who exploit rather helpless women in society. He could also have even examined the larger social forces which lead to such exploitation, but what do we get instead? Laura, as is seen by the narrator, is a sex-maniac whose indiscriminate passion encourages even the worst street rough like Nathaniel to have children with her; and following the pattern Naipaul has set for his characters, it is no surprise that Laura's eldest daughter ends up committing suicide after giving birth to an unwanted baby. According to Naipaul's formula, there was no way Lorna could succeed, given the kind of family background she comes from.

The more the narrator continues to unfold events or introduce characters in Miguel Street, the more varied and disgusting the display of idiocy becomes; Bolo, having failed to advance himself by other means, tried to do so through chance. Initially, this character spends up to a staggering $300 (three hundred dollars) buying newspapers with the hope that he might win the "spot the ball" prize, and, of course, he never wins. His next venture is estate investment; he tries to put his money

into an inexpensive house-buying project and this time he is duped by the crook who had advertised about the scheme in the papers. Bolo's "stupidity" is such that he is duped yet another time when a boat captain dumps him off somewhere in Trinidad after assuring him that the place is Venezuela, where Bolo had paid to go. He comes back to Miguel Street and he finally settles down to buying sweepstake tickets secretly and on the one occasion when Bolo wins, he is driven by imbecility to tear up the winning ticket.

The other characters are not shown to be any better; they are thick-skulled or snobbish, and Hat's brother, Edward, serves as the epitome of this snobbery. When it is suggested to him that he participates in a local talent parade, Edward replied "Don't make me laugh. What sort of talent they think Trinidad have?" (Emphasis is mine) On another occasion when Hat asks Edward to compete in a singing program, Edward derisively asks, "Singing for who, Trinidad People?"--a rhetorical question which shows this character's low opinion of his people.

My emphasis has continually been on the way the characters appear in Miguel Street because that is the way they are seen by the child-narrator. As has been previously indicated, the narrator sees these adult characters in Miguel Street as nothing but dolts and children, and what is significant here is the fund of sympathy or even identity that exists between the creator and his narrator. Naipaul, unlike Beti, for example, does nothing to differentiate his narrator's point of view from his own. This not to suggest that Naipaul is unaware of the uses of irony and other devices; his use of irony, which can be piquant as when he uses it against Mr. Chittaranjan, the lawyer, is hardly used to show support for the people.

Even in articles by critics who are otherwise favourably disposed toward V. S. Naipaul, some glaring defects of Miguel Street have been pointed out: R. H. Lee speaks of the overpopulation of "eccentric characters" in the novel,[14] and Gordon Rohlehr sees Naipaul at times as "the irresponsible ironist, subtle, but lacking in a sensitive participation in the life he anatomizes."[15] Such comments are partly true, but they are basically under-statements which stem from a failure to look at the novel from a class perspective. Naipaul is writing for the petty bourgeois class he represents, and, in a typically arrogant manner, he portrays ordinary working class people as children who are devoid of intelligence and good sense. He exploits the naive point of view of a child to call the Trinidadians names and it is meeted out with tremendous comic gusto. Occasionally, he condescends to give the characters some human qualities as tenderness, but by and large the world Naipaul, through his narrator-spokesman, presents to us is full of inanity, brutality, complete gloom and hopelessness; and for a child to look upon adults as children is the ultimate insult and distortion.

NOTES

[1] David Ormerod, "In a Derelict Land: The Novels of V. S. Naipaul", Contemporary Literature, 9, i (1968), 74.

[2] Karl Miller, "V. S. Naipaul and the New Order", Kenyon Review XXIX, 5 (Nov. 1967), p. 685.

[3] H. B. Singh, "V. S. Naipaul: A Spokesman for New Colonialism", Literature and Ideology, 2 (1969), 81. Singh rightly describes Miguel Street as "a museum of funny specimens of the natives of neo-colonies for the amusement of the imperialists."

[4] George Lamming, Pleasures of Exile (London: Michael Joseph, 1960) p. 225.

[5] V. S. Naipaul, Miguel Street (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971). Miguel Street was originally published by Andre Deutsch Ltd., but all references are to the 1971 Penguin edition which shall henceforth be abbreviated as MS.

[6] A. C. Derrick suggests that ". . . even though the party finally comes to an end for every character in the book (Miguel Street) their vigorous vitality and resilience secure the reader's sympathy." The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 7, (July, 1969), p. 34.

Similar views are expressed in an article by Patricia Morley, "Comic Form in Naipaul's Fiction", Bulletin of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, 9 (1972), pp. 49-65.

[7] R. H. Lee, "The Novels of V. S. Naipaul", in Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul, ed. Robert D. Hamner (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1977) p. 71.

[8] Hamner, p. XV.

[9] Hamner, p. XXV.

[10] V. S. Naipaul, "V. S. Naipaul Discusses How Writing Changes the Writer", Ndaanan 4, i-ii (1974), p. 62.

[11] David Bates, London Sunday Times, May 26, 1963, p. 30.

[12] Ormerod, p. 74.

[13] Gordon Rohlehr, "The Ironic Approach: The Novels of V. S. Naipaul."

in The Islands in Between. Ed. Louis James (London; Oxford University Press). Reprinted in Hamner's Critical Perspectives pp. 181-2.

[14] Lee, p. 71.

[15] Rohlehr, op cit. p. 179.

CONCLUSION

> When human actions are formed to make an art work, the form that is made can never be divorced from the human beings, including the moral judgements, that are implicit whenever human beings act.[1]

Looking at each of the novels that have been studied in detail for this thesis, one realizes that each author has pointed out the inferior status that is accorded to children in his society. As was previously indicated, Toundi in Oyono's Une vie de boy suggests that the colonialists regarded the indigenous Cameroonians as children, a condescending statement which has connotations of 'innocence' and ignorance. This opinion is echoed by Richard in Black Boy, when he recalls 'hearing that white people looked upon Negroes as a variety of children . . . ' George's mother, in In the Castle of my Skin, never stops reminding the boy-narrator that he is only a boy and should not start acting as a man, and in Naipaul's Miguel Street, the narrator specifically attributes his ignorance about the way people get money, to his being a child.

It is easy to devine the probable reasons why these novelists would have preferred children (considered as second-rate beings in their societies), as narrators, especially when one examines the other major themes treated in these novels. In Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba, Une vie de boy, Black Boy, and In the Castle of my Skin, the major problems handled by the authors include stormy subjects such as race relations, and the unethical roles of the state and the church. Conscious of the dangerous nature of such themes, the novelists probably decided to use children as narrators in their works for two principle reasons.

First, when the criticism of certain institutions and individuals is levelled (as in these novels), by a child, some adult members of the society (including those in the ruling class), may be blind to such criticism since, in their opinion, it is emitted by a child--an inexperienced and less intelligent being in an adult-oriented society. Such a technique also enhances the intentional effacement of the author, as well as minimises the chances of any long-winded authorial commentary--unquestionable virtues in twentieth century prose. Second, by allowing their respective narrators to dramatize the varied experiences they go through, the novelists constantly induce the reader's sympathy because the inhumane effects of such experiences become even more so when we realize that they affect the lives of children.

In the case of V. S. Naipaul, one can say that he, like the other novelists, is aware of the full potentialities of the theme of childhood but he develops it in a different way. Naipaul uses childhood 'innocence' as a decoy, in Miguel Street, to give artistic articulation to the contempt he has for his fellow Trinidadians. As with the Beti and others, he couches his personal statements by making them emanate from the consciousness of his child-narrator.

A major conclusion I have thus drawn from this study is that the thematic device of childhood is an extremely viable means by which the world on the page can be linked with that of the real world. Such an assertion may perhaps lead to the age-old question of fact and fictionality, especially when one reads comments like these, by Lloyd Demause:

> The literary historians, mistaking books for life, construct a fictional picture of childhood, as though one could know what really happened in the nineteenth century American home by reading Tom Sawyer.[2]

Although it is true that no reader may know all that happened in any historical period by simply reading works of fiction written in that period, it must be stressed that, contrary to what Demause implies, the fictional world created by authors can, and in fact does, often give indications about real life situations. Writers like Dickens and Mark Twain did not aim at empirical truths (as authors of scientific texts do), but there is no doubt that one gets a better understanding of societies depicted by these two authors if one understands events and people from the points of view of both the young Pip in Great Expectations and Huck in Huckleberry Finn. This is not to suggest that Demause's assertion is entirely wrong, for it hits at the core of a problem encountered during this investigation.

It has been difficult to prove whether the boy-narrators in the novels examined are just part of the whole gamut of stock characters such as the naive foreigner in Montesquieu's Les Lettres persannes, or the prostitute (for example, those in Zola's Nana or Cyprian Ekwensi's Jagua Nana (1961)), found in all literatures, or whether these children are real representations of children as they are in their respective societies. For this reason, I cannot make a definitive declaration about verisimilitude in these works, but from work on this thesis one certainly notices other areas that can be explored. Since it is still impossible to determine whether children are just stylized literary creations or true portraits of children in black societies, it will be necessary to look at the anthropological, sociological and psychological aspects of children in these societies, and see how they match with their literary counterparts. This, however, cannot all be done for a Master of Arts thesis.

NOTES

[1] Wayne C. Booth, op cit.p. 397.

[2] Lloyd Demause, The History of Childhood, (New York: Psycho-history Press, 1974), p. 4.

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